

# Bioregionalism and the Concept of Place

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A bioregion is defined by author Kirkpatrick Sales (1985, 43) in the seminal bioregional book *Dwellers in the Land* as "a life territory, a place defined by its life forms, its topography and its biota, rather than by human dictates; a region governed by nature, not legislature." Several environmental thinkers have attempted to describe what a bioregional society might look like and what technology might be necessary to exist at a bioregional level (Callenbach 1975; Schumacher 1973; Bryan and McClaughry 1989; Todd and Todd 1984).

The scope of this article is not to recount what a bioregional state would look like but to discuss why it is appropriate to use a place-based approach to determine the proper geographical size of the state. Most environmentalists would immediately answer "the bioregion." Although the bioregion seems to be the favored area for state activity among members of the environmental movement, few have ever really developed the underlying assumptions and foundation of this position or explored the implications. I intend to flesh out the concept of place as it relates to the topic at hand, in hopes that this will enlarge the overall dialogue on the bioregional option.

The bioregional discourse has been beset by a host of critiques centering on the questions "Why is the connection to the land and a particular place important in the modern age?" and "Has/have the nation-state and/or technology and/or urbanization made this connection largely irrelevant?"

Most of the responses have pointed to the looming environmental crisis that makes the connection necessary for human survival, or they have been appeals to primitive tribes (portrayed as the noblest of savages) and their connection to the land that was somehow forgotten or destroyed in the modernizing move. Thus the goal is to get back to the time when all lived in harmony with the environment.

Either response is essentially a non-response. The former is unresponsive to the technological addiction that suggests we can just invent our way out of the crisis if we amass enough resources, while the latter relies on a complete surrender of technological achievement and a return to a population density that would condemn over half of those living on the planet. There is, however, another way out of this critique that is responsive, while at the same time constructive. This approach grounds the foundation of the bioregional argument in the concept of place.

To move forward in the bioregional dialogue, the importance of a place-centered perspective must be discussed. Without a grounding in the concept of place, the bioregional arguments are largely indefensible against modernist critiques. This article will develop a place-based argument for the bioregion as the appropriate geographical size of the state.

Initially, I must define and describe *place*. From there I will show how place is

not only defined and perceived by humanity, but is itself defining of that humanity's existence. Once it is demonstrated that people are shaped to a large extent by the places in which they are located, we can then address and respond to several critiques that have been leveled against a place-centered perspective.

Three critiques will be considered here: the nation-state or nationalization thesis, the critique of technology, and the challenge of place orientation in light of the mass urbanization trends of world populations. This notion of place does not necessarily lead to a pseudo-agrarian attachment to the land, but it is possible to get there from a place perspective. After addressing the critiques, I will focus on how such a move to an eco-conscious place perspective is both possible and necessary.

### **Place: Defined and Defining**

To clarify the discussion, let us begin by defining what we mean by place. In his book *Place and Politics*, political scientist John Agnew (1987, 43) defines place as

the geographical context or locality in which agency interpolates social structure. Political behavior is the product of agency as structured by the historically constituted social contexts in which people live their lives.

In this definition, Agnew attempts to solve the agent/structure debate by suggesting the agent and structure inform and create each other in places.<sup>1</sup> Agnew (1987, 28) elaborates on what counts for place by describing a threefold criterion for place:

three major elements: *locale*, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); *location*, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and *sense of place*, the local structure of feelings.

In addition to geographic area being defined by social and economic forces, location is determined by biotic and topographical forces as well (see Callicott 1988; Rozak 1972; Markusen 1987; Sales 1985). People's social interactions are still largely dependent on such biotic forces as the weather and such topographic forces as physical proximity and accessibility.

Place should not be considered solely a static, unchanging location that dictates to whatever agent encounters it; place is not the parameters of interaction. Rather, place is properly seen as a process of interaction that forms and is formed by the unique constitutive elements of the encounter. These processes are ongoing and constantly in a situation of (re)formation of each element (Pred 1986). Thus, individuals, social networks, communities, and the specific land itself all have a part in the ongoing transformation of each other in a given context, termed here, *place*.

Each place is unique historically, spatially, and constituently. For example, locals consider it humorous to describe the summer heat in Phoenix by saying, "Yeah, but it's a *dry* heat." This humor has no referent to those who have not experienced the place-based conditions of a summer in Phoenix.

A great deal of literature already exists about how people define the places in which they live (see for example Gunn 1978; Jones and Rogers 1976; and Doxiadis 1977). But our definition of place is an interactive process in which place also defines people. It will be helpful now to explore some of the ways in which this interaction occurs and the effects of the mutually defining moments of place.

Throughout history, people have identified themselves primarily with the regions from which they come (Markusen 1987). Although people have become more mobile in recent years, this connection to place has

not been destroyed completely. In fact, their mobility may actually increase their desire to settle and find a place they can call home.

In the book *Place, Practice, and Structure*, political scientist Allan Pred (1986) suggests that all human geography is historically and spatially specific. All social structures that shape human existence are experienced by the individual in place-specific ways, bearing a distinct character of the place in which the structure is encountered. Pred further suggests that the details of everyday life and social structuring occur locally. This locally defined limitation includes the ordering of language that circumscribes for a population the kinds of activities they can conceive of and participate in (Pred 1986, 17).

Although extra-local influences are becoming more the norm of modern societies, it is still in the context of place that these bits of information are interpreted and political discussions are held. It is in *place* that the full depth of meaning can be understood because it is located to a particular, rather than remaining abstract and universal. It is not universals that move people to action but particular located circumstances that make the desirability of action coherent (Agnew 1987). For example, residents of the Phoenix area became united in their concern for action when an unseasonable rain storm caused flooding that washed a landfill down the Salt River. These residents, who may have had little in common across the urban landscape, found a justification for concern in a common place-based experience. The same kind of place-based identity emerges in California after an earthquake or in Florida after a hurricane.

It may be argued that the cosmopolitan perspective has made a place-orientation irrelevant; however, those traveling across the world are still aware of the importance of local customs and practices, and they try to fit in with the indigenous culture by

following local patterns. Additionally, only the most foolish of world travelers would go to Iceland in the winter without a coat or to the Sahara in the summer with only wool clothing. Constant comparisons are drawn to the travelers' own place; that is, things are compared to the referent *back home*. Place is still important in the minds of such travelers.

Ultimately the most important forming experiences of our lives are obtained at a local, place-based level, rather than in abstracts and universals. A person is more likely to change his or her behavior by observing the experiences of a good person rather than a moral maxim. Agnew (1987, 33) explains the condition of the present world in regard to place orientation:

The strongest forms of bonding are still local: a village or town, particular mountains or valleys. In many parts of the world when asked where they come from, or where they were formed or belong, people respond in terms of local reference.... Most people still follow well-worn local paths in their daily existence. Though national and global "issues" have increased in number and significance relative to local ones, they take on meaning as they relate to local agendas.

Although more and more of the world's population is subject to rapid urbanization (a condition I will discuss more extensively below), the frame of reference that continues to form and dominate a person's world view is local in nature and based on patterns of sustained face-to-face social interaction that occur in the context of a specific place. Put simply, people are formed and informed by the places in which they live. This process suggests that place may be a proper point to start when trying to discover which form of state people would be willing to participate in rather than which form of state people could be coerced to go along with. This connection between place and people may be straightforward enough, but the very premise of a meaningful connection between

the two has come under increasing critique from many levels. It will be useful to address three of the most prominent critiques in the hope that once addressed and answered, the discourse of place and bioregionalism can proceed.

### **The Nationalization Critique and Response**

The emergence of the nation-state system in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the consolidation of nationalist power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have called into question the relevance of place and local bases of power. The nationalization thesis, which has dominated policy making and academic discourse, states that place and locality have been losing influence in the minds of individual agents; these concepts have been replaced by an increasing focus on national interests, social cleavages, and patterns of social construction (Agnew 1987).

The gains in national allegiance and loss of local formation have been pitted against each other in a zero-sum game. Although denying that national and international issues have gained prominence is difficult, one should be skeptical of accepting the fact that, in light of nationalizing moves, place is no longer relevant in the formation of individual's lives or the state as a whole.

This skepticism is well grounded for several reasons. Initially, the zero-sum formulation of the nationalization thesis is empirically denied. Evidence suggests that people have not always focused on the nation-state as a source of meaning (Sales 1980). More importantly, in the modern age, people still turn to local place to discover meaning and form opinions (see examples in Pred 1986; Markusen 1987; and Agnew 1987). Attempts have been made to rescue the nationalization thesis in light of these empirical findings, but each attempt has

been proven largely unsuccessful and often an intentional distortion of lived experience (see Agnew 1987, 95–107). People have certainly become more aware of national and global issues, but primary loyalty and relevance are still decided in local place.

It is no accident that place has been dislocated as a source of meaning in the drive toward nationalization; attachments to place are seen as impediments and threats to nationalizing progress. The nationalist agenda has constituted a three-fold separation of place and power. First, the emerging nation must envelop and control previously autonomous locations in order to expand its resource base. Secondly, the nation must institute uniform legal codes to unify previously independent ethnic and linguistic regions. Finally, the grassroots publics of those places are incorporated into participant roles in the national system.

State-building elites are able to develop their own legitimacy through the perpetuation of cultural, economic, and political hegemony (Agnew 1987, 38–39). Independent places are played off against each other to weaken the power base of place and strengthen the power of the national government (Agnew 1987, 39). Although these nationalizing efforts have not been entirely successful (due to the resilient connection people have to place), they have been able to dominate the academic, media, and bureaucratic apparatus so that any other possibilities beyond (or before) the nation-state are portrayed as hopelessly lacking utopian fantasies. Fortunately, a focus on the nation is not the only possible source of meaning, and we must continually question the either/or dichotomy foisted upon the discourse by the nationalizing thesis.

Other reasons to reject a shift to an exclusively national focus are the consequences inherent in such a move. According to Michel

Foucault (1970), power arises out of local arenas. To focus on the national or state apparatus would risk missing the primary way in which power enters and affects human lives. This approach does not try to suggest that power is not exercised at the level of the nation or state but simply that this is not the most influential condition of power exercised by and upon the individual. That power is still found in the local process of (re)definition known as place.

Not only would a focus on place, rather than the nation, be a more realistic perspective for understanding the possibilities of power, but such a focus also would be more pragmatic for several reasons. I shall highlight only a few for the purposes of the discussion here. First, locating state power along place-based lines would increase participation and the democratic process due to the possibility of face-to-face interaction.

Many political theorists (Plato, Montesquieu, Dewey, and Mumford, to name a few) have suggested that there is an optimum size for a democracy, beyond which participatory democracy is no longer possible (and that size is always relatively small—10,000 or so at the most). Also, a place-based orientation would allow for more responsible social and ecological action because the agent is likely to see the direct consequences of his or her actions. A national or global perspective allows costs and consequences to be externalized so that we have no idea where our resources originate or where our waste goes.

Peace within a place-based society is easier to keep—the people and structures involved are forming each other, and a common world view is likely to evolve on most issues. Where disagreement persists, it is quickly noticed at a face-to-face level before it escalates out of control. These are just a few of the reasons why one should (and often does) keep the focus on place alive amidst the onslaught of the nationalization critique.

## **The Technological Critique and Response**

The question of technology is another area in which the battlelines seem to be drawn between the proponents of a rapid, globalizing, homogenization and standard of living offered by high technology and the place-based local affiliations that are not dependent on such technology. Again, a zero-sum game is offered in the technological critique of place-based human formation. The question of whether the advent of modern technology has made the focus on place largely irrelevant is often raised. A simple response by an environmental advocate of a bioregional agenda would be “No—end of discussion.” But the issue is not that simple.

The technological critique of a continued focus on place suggests that face-to-face co-presence is no longer necessary in an age of electronic mass communication. Because technology such as computers, televisions, and telephones can transfer information over great distances, the network of interactions has expanded so far beyond specific locations that a spatial referent for human formation is no longer necessary. Provided a location is endowed with proper working technology, the people there can instantaneously enter the life experience of any other location so endowed (Cohen 1989, 103). Further, modern means of transportation have rapidly connected previously distant locations and enabled participation in a global network of interaction no longer dependent on a place-based common referent (Cohen 1989, 104).

This argument against a place focus seems compelling at the outset, but it has several problems. Like all the critiques discussed in this article, it depends on a deification of progress that engenders a no turning back mentality. In this position, we are at the cutting edge of human possibilities,

and notions such as place simply have been bypassed to pursue a better way. To the extent that individuals buy into this mindset, it has power over them. However, the empirical evidence cited above suggests that people have not completely bought into this logic.

The linear notion of progress embodied in the technological critique is offered as an either/or proposition. Either one accepts the way of the world and jumps on the techno-bandwagon, or one rejects this technology and is doomed to an unfulfilled existence of limited possibilities. The reality is that people can reject technology as the panacea to all problems and still live a fulfilled life open to a myriad of possibilities. Thus, the technological critique paints a false dichotomy.

Secondly, the majority of the world's population has not bought into (or been privy to) the electronic technical revolution. The technological critique is thus applicable only to members of the first world and then not even all of those people—for example, Native Americans, the homeless, and the lower classes. Supporters of technology would respond that it is only a matter of time before all people are drawn into the global technological network.

In reality, the growth of technology has been confined to those national societies endorsing such an attitude and financially equipped to support such an attitude. The majority of people have been prevented from acquiring even the most basic of technologies in the information age. To assume that they will eventually come around to the joys of technology seems to be largely a product of the ethnocentric, inflated, self-importance of western societies. This assumption does not begin to address the question of the geographic scope of the state in most of the developing world where the primary focus remains on the place in which one is located.

In the book *In the Absence of the Sacred*, political scientist Jerry Mander (1991) suggests that the technological critique is not value-neutral and not equally enabling of all humanity. Mander critiques technological achievements such as television and computers on several levels. Initially, technology may be able to manipulate time and space to transfer large amounts of information, materials, and capital rapidly over vast spaces, but rather than liberate humanity from the oppression of a place-based existence, it has served to make possible massive exploitation of humanity and nature through the actions of multinational corporations.

Additionally, many of the subtle nuances experienced in face-to-face encounters at a local level are lost in even the simplest phone call. This diminishment of experience is amplified in the thirty-second video bit of information that passes for news around the world. The result is the illusion of increased interaction with other places, but the reality is an extremely limited and controlled encounter with the "other" (Mander 1991). A false reality of interaction is created, which is dangerous enough in itself, but if we are to abandon our place-based identities in the hopes of gaining a global or national identity from technology, then we are truly at the mercy of unknown information elites. The possibilities of abuse in such a situation would warrant a cautious consideration of the technological critique that calls for the abandonment of any connection to place.

### **The Urbanization Critique and Response**

Finally, a place-based perspective must address the urbanization critique that suggests in an era of rapid urbanization, any connection to place that one might have

had has been lost, and the individual has been absorbed into a relatively homogenous urban society. In this perspective, it matters little whether the individual resides in New York, Los Angeles, New Delhi, or Paris. The urban experience is said to have redefined the individual beyond the bounds of place and local ties.

The urbanization critique represents a compelling challenge to a place-based perspective; however, there are two reasons why this critique should be set aside in favor of a concept of place. The first deals with the empirical validity of the urbanization claim; the second deals with the consequences of accepting such a claim.

One need only travel to any five major urban areas in the world to see a tremendous amount of diversity within the urban experience. Much of this diversity is attributable to the local character of the places and regions within which the urban center is located (Pred 1986). Additionally, the majority of human beings do not reside in urban areas (despite the urbanist's claims). Sixty percent of the world's population lives in rural areas and engages in occupations of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (Gunn 1978, 49). Although this number is decreasing at an alarming rate, many human experiences cannot be described by the tenants of the urbanization critique.

The urban situation cannot be ignored, but a further examination makes clear that place has not been lost in the move; instead, it has often become more important. Take the examples of refugees who, upon arriving in a new city or country, search out those who have connections with the place that was left behind. That place is then recreated in the new location—for example, Chinatown in San Francisco, Little Havana in Miami, or the Algerian communities in Paris. Rather than losing the notion of place in the urbanizing move, these dislocated

people bring remnants of the old place to the new location in their memories.

The consequences of accepted mass urbanization provide further justification for a cautious approach to the critique. In his book *Where the Wasteland Ends*, philosopher Theodore Rozak (1972) outlines the consequences of a disconnected urban existence as increased alienation, unhealthy living conditions, increased rate of suicide, and a severe limitation on the possibilities of meaningful human existence—in short, a disconnected urban experience creates a “wasteland,” both internally to the agent and externally to the structure of society.

Above all, Rozak considers life in the urban setting, particularly the megacity, as the ultimate in artificial living. It is indeed possible that many urban dwellers have abandoned any sense of place that is connected to nature. This temporary detachment allows the exploitation of the environment and other human beings not directly encountered in the day-to-day interaction in the city, but upon which city-life depends (Rozak 1972; see also Callicott 1988). To accept that this is the future of the world, and that place is no longer relevant, is to accept an artificial future that is unsustainable in the long run because of its disconnection from that which ultimately sustains it.

Thus, place can be ignored in light of modern trends towards nationalization, high technology, and urbanization; however, the cost of ruling out place as a significant determinant of human existence may be too high to accept. The responses to these critiques are not meant to suggest that place is the only appropriate consideration, rather that place is a relevant feature of modern human existence that cannot be ignored because of its potential power and impact.

## From Place to Bioregion

Now that a space has been made for place in the discourse on the appropriate geographical scope of the state, it remains to be demonstrated how place can be connected to the land and thus be a foundational concept for a bioregional position.

Social ecologist Murray Bookchin (1982), in his book *The Ecology of Freedom*, suggests that human existence has always been tied up with the processes of the natural world. Place is not simply a conglomeration of human interaction with other humans, but human interaction with nature as well. According to Bookchin, human interaction with other humans has always been related to humans' participation in the natural world. The domination of nature by humans has led to the domination of other humans by humans.

In pre-modern societies, humanity was always aware of the interdependence of the natural processes of their place. Most holidays and celebrations were tied to this interaction, such as the spring harvest festival that finds its expression in Christianity as the Easter celebration of new life, or the winter solstice festival that finds its Christian expression as the feast of Christmas (a light comes into the heart of darkness).

Bookchin (1982) details the gradual dissolving of a conscious connection to the environment as a result of rising hierarchies and organization based on abstract concepts such as the nation, technological progress, and the city. These abstractions have shifted the focus away from place (as described above) and natural interdependencies. Just as it is illusionary to believe that place is no longer important because of these new emphases, it is also illusionary to believe that modern man has effectively been able to sever his connection to the natural world. Although it may not be

recognized, the connection persists and is necessary for human survival (Bookchin 1982). To deny the connection is to deny the fundamental relationship that supports and sustains all life on the planet. Perhaps a better approach would be to reexamine this fundamental relationship as it is most directly encountered in the process of local places.

When one begins again to focus on place as a primary formational and forming experience in which real sources of power are invested, then one is drawn into a consideration of the relations to the land that make up an integral part of such a place. This focus has not been lost by many human beings who continue to find their primary association to local place and the land that is a part of that place. Agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry (1972, 67) explains this regional attitude:

The regionalism that I adhere to could be defined simply as **local life aware of itself**. It would tend to substitute for the myths and stereotypes of a region a particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in. It pertains to living as much as to writing, and it pertains to living before it pertains to writing. The motive of such regionalism is the awareness that local life is intricately dependent, for its quality but also for its continuance, upon local knowledge.

The additional consideration of the land and biota of a region does not diminish the concept and potential of place but enhances it by tapping more deeply the subtle nuances that constitute the experienced process of place.

To suggest that the appropriate geographical scope of the state is the bioregion is to take seriously the notion of place and to offer a sustainable alternative to the nationalizing, urbanizing, hierarchical momentum currently dominating the discourse of the state. The bioregion is the model most sensitive geographically to

notions of place that can still be considered a state (anarchic voluntary organizations may be more responsive to concerns of place, but this political arrangement makes the whole notion of state problematic and is beyond the scope of this inquiry). The bioregion is also the best hope for a sustainable future for human society for reasons that have been argued elsewhere in the literature (Sales 1985; Sales 1980; Gunn 1978; Callenbach 1975; Schumacher 1973; Bryan and McClaughry 1989; Todd and Todd 1984).

This research has not attempted to suggest that the bioregion is the only possible scope of the state, rather that room ought to be made for a bioregional option, given the deep human connection to place and land that persists despite contradicting modern social philosophies. The notion of place gives the bioregional discourse a firm ground to stand on in response to countless dismissive attacks by advocates of the status quo. Reference and reliance on place also give the bioregional discussion a connection to the lived experience of peoples throughout the world, rich and poor. A space has been created from which one can not only launch a critique of modernism but also connect to present realities and offer alternative futures. That space is the process of place, and the alternative future of place is bioregionalism. ☀

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This approach relies on the structuration theory developed by Anthony Giddens and others (for a detailed explanation see Cohen 1989). All that is important for this research is to recognize that the concept of place is useful for moving beyond the either/or positioning of most political science on the issue. The agents recreate the structure by their own actions, but they are also formed by the structures, both of which are formed by the temporal-spatial location in which they interact—in a word, place.

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