

The Historical Role of Bioregionalism

Gene Marshall

Where we, humanity, go next is not written in stone; it is open-ended. History is “to be determined.” In very large measure humanity can, must, and will decide what comes next.

There is a thread in the vast drama of the cosmos toward greater complexity and greater consciousness. This amazing trend has brought forth our species who are capable of being aware of the entire Earth and of Earth’s place in the cosmic process. In more poetic words, humanity is the Earth in its capacity to be aware of itself. This awareness includes the capacity to celebrate this entire, mysterious, wondrous, glorious planet and to assume responsibility for choosing where we, the Earth, go next.

Of course, there are many factors over which humans have no influence whatsoever. The sun is going to shine. The Earth is going rotate around the sun. And there is nothing we can do or ought to do about that. But there are options about which we can and indeed must choose. The destiny of this planet is, to a very significant degree, dependent upon those choices.

One option that faces humanity is the option of noticing that corporations are ruling the world and then assisting those corporations to rule the world better. Let us not be seduced by this option.

Another option that faces humanity is the option of noticing that corporations are ruling the world and then insisting that this is inappropriate, that democratic institutions of governance should shape and referee the economic playing field--that corporations and all other economic players should play by the rules set by democratic governance or be severely penalized, perhaps thrown off the playing field, perhaps permanently put out of the game.

Now in order for such democratic governance to referee the economic playing field appropriately, the citizenry of such governments must be enlightened with ecological sanity.

Bioregionalism is a primary plank in the definition of ecological sanity. The human is an exotic species who has migrated to ever new environments almost always initiating ecological havoc. Unlike trees, humans have never fully settled down. Industrialized humanity has been especially effective in stressing environments and then moving on to richer fields. Settling down is still seen by many people today as almost inhuman.

This is the revolutionary thing that bioregionalism asks of humanity: to settle down someplace--to take roots next to some tree and make friends with the squirrels and the birds and the earth worms and the snakes and all the other life-forms that live in that place. This includes making friends with the ordinary, everyday, wise but ignorant, ignorant yet wise human beings who live in this place. It means persuading those other human beings to also settle down there and to assume responsibility there for every blade of grass, every aluminum can, every scrap of paper, every human baby that is born in that place. Human beings actually flourish in communal interdependence, but in order to have such experiences, human beings need to settle down. They must make covenants with the places where they live. They must marry the trees, make love to the grasses, prepare meals for the birds, and become the natural living and dying bodies that they are.

Bioregionalism is calling humanity to settle down on this earth, in one region, in one specific living place. Bioregionalism begins with this profound cultural overhaul of people’s attitude toward natural place. And this cultural overhaul includes people’s sense of creative responsibility for their natural place and for the relationships of their place with the entire planet.

Bioregionalism begins with this cultural overhaul, but it does not end there. Bioregionalism is also a political movement moving toward true governance, governance in accord with the invisible and largely unknown “laws” of nature. Human law that does not agree with the invisible law of nature is inherently illegitimate. Instead of imposing our human laws upon nature, our laws need to obey nature, obey the obvious necessities we face to balance nature’s support for the human with nature’s

support for the whole biosphere of which humans are one part. The trees have their role in things--a role no human being can play. The microbes have their role in things--a role no human being can play. Human law must support optimal possibilities for every creature to play its appropriate role. Of course, humans have to decide what is appropriate--what "appropriate" means in the light of what nature is constantly telling us through the millions of voices with which nature speaks to us. So this is our bioregional politics: ordinary human beings listening to nature and then telling corporations and all other institutions how to behave.

Bioregionalism is also an economic movement. Humanity is characterized by stored objective knowledge and technological how-to-do-things. There is nothing wrong with stored objective knowledge and technological means. These existing dynamics are unavoidable. What is avoidable is the illusion that we can ever know precisely how everything works and thus have perfect control over all our situations. Rather, we must learn to be content with being ignorant and out of control, and then, as ignorant, out-of-control creatures, create the knowledge and techniques we need to best obey the voices of Nature. It is one of our options that we can create alternative ways of sustaining ourselves and enriching our lives, ways that also enrich the lives of all the other living beings and life systems that make up this planet. The choice is not between technology and no technology. The choice is between sane technologies and run-away technologies controlled by multinational corporations structured to make the rich richer, the poor poorer, and the Earth devastated.

I want to say another word about bioregional politics. Bioregional politics does not tell us that we must vote for Green Party candidates or that we must not vote for Green Party candidates. Voting is only one small part of bioregional politics. In the United States, with its two-party, winner-take-all system, organizing a third party is a highly ambiguous project. In terms of opposing corporation rulership (using my intuitive scale of 1 to 100), Greens rank well above 90; Democrats rank well below 20; and Republicans rank well below 1. So there are good arguments for voting Green. But there are also good arguments for voting Democratic to restrain Republican foolishness. I cannot see any valid argument for voting Republican unless your specific choice is between some rare, one in-a-hundred, anti-corporation Republican and a corporation-brought Democrat.

What we actually need for the long haul is to pull together into one political party those Republicans, Democrats, Greens, and a lot of other people who see that a wholesome ecological future depends upon ending corporation rulership of our democracies. It does not matter by what name that new political party is called. What matters is that we bring together a working majority over against corporation-bought politicians. This new majority will also have to stand over against the moralistic dismissal of the issues of women, blacks, Hispanics, the homeless, the jobless, small business people and family farmers, and many other groups whose actual wellbeing depends on resisting the rulership of the corporations. At the present time, the Democrats are making more headway than Greens in speaking to the issues of women and minorities. Greens are making the most headway with youth. Republicans seem to be betting their future on a coalition of obsolete moralisms which will, hopefully, become peripheral as the awakening of humanity proceeds.

In spite of my interest in electoral politics, I agree with those who say that the main focus of bioregionalism is cultural. Yet building bioregional culture needs to include awakening the members of this new culture to meaningful participation in electoral politics. A hundred years from now, we may have regional governance that is more bioregional than our present political structures, but for now the existing political structures provide the best means we have of bringing meaningful restraint to the major corporations and their anti-democratic global institutions. Let's do it.