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## **A Bioregional Perspective on Global Ethics**

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The term "bioregionalism" was first popularized in the 1970s by ecologist Raymond Dasmann and social activist Peter Berg. Berg defines a bioregion as ". . . a geographic area defined by natural characteristics including watersheds, landforms, soils, geological qualities, native plants and animals, climate, and weather." Bioregionalism, Berg suggests, ". . . promotes an inhabitory attitude by which humans adapt themselves to the natural characteristics of a bioregion in an appropriate way (Evanoff 1998, 1). Contrary to current trends towards a global economy, in which both resources and goods are freely traded around the globe, bioregionalism emphasizes relative economic self-reliance based on the principle of local production for local consumption. Dasmann (1976, 413ff.) used the term "ecosystem people" to describe cultures that are able to live comfortably and sustainably within local environmental conditions. The term "biosphere people," by contrast, describes cultures which exploit resources from other environments in order to support a higher standard of living than they could maintain otherwise. While ecosystem cultures have been the norm throughout most human history, current trends towards globalization encourage people, particularly in developed countries, to become biosphere people, i.e., to consume more resources than their local bioregions can sustainably provide.

Bioregionalism is not opposed to all forms of trade nor to remedial aid in times of genuine distress (such as famine). It does suggest, however, that the goal of development assistance should not be to draw a given region into the global economy but rather to enhance local self-reliance. Dasmann suggests that self-reliance ". . . involves development of the capacity to supply the basic needs of people—food, energy, water, clothing, shelter. . . ." (1981, 10). People should be encouraged to grow crops not for export but for their own consumption; manufacturing should similarly be geared not towards export but towards meeting local needs. Once basic needs have been met, surpluses can be traded.

The principle of local production for local consumption fosters local control over the economic and political decision-making processes. In a global economy decisions are increasingly made by centralized economic and political institutions which show little concern for the consequences of their actions on local communities. Transnational corporations by definition do not belong to any country and ultimately there is no effective democratic means of controlling their activities. International development and trade institutions, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and World Trade Organization, reflect the interests of global capital more than they do the interests of local communities. Both wealth and power are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a global capitalist elite, often at the expense of average citizens in both the developed and developing countries. A study by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce predicted that by the year 2000 a few hundred transnational corporations will control more than 50% of the world's total assets (cited in Rifkin 1991, 294). The world's ten largest multinationals make more money annually than the 100 poorest countries ("Globalization-The Facts," 18). The 400 richest people in the United States have

incomes that are more than the combined gross national products of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal-where one billion people live (Korten 1995, 108).

Bioregionalism offers a radical, but non-Marxist, alternative to capitalist-style development. Bioregionalism is as opposed to the centralization of political power in government bureaucracies as it is to the centralization of economic power in multinational corporations (cf. Sale 1991). Although bioregionalism respects cultural diversity and seeks to avoid the creation of what Berg (1981) calls a "global monoculture," it is by no means insular or racist. Bioregionalists advocate not only the creation of decentralized political and economic structures that are democratically controlled by local communities, but also the need to build an international grassroots movement that links people together across racial, cultural, and national lines.

The international dimension of bioregionalism, however, has remained undertheorized and it is proposed here that any bioregional approach to cross-cultural dialogue on global ethics should be based on the following principles: (1) A concern for meeting basic human needs on a universal basis. A high quality of life should not be equated, however, with consumerism or overconsumptive lifestyles. (2) A concern for social justice. Social justice does not necessarily mean achieving complete equality but it should minimally involve avoiding any form of exploitation which allows some individuals in the global arena to benefit at the expense of others. (3) A concern for ecological integrity. The concept of integrity includes both the idea that natural resources should be conserved for human use and the idea that sufficient natural habitats should be preserved to allow the continued evolution of non-human species.

This paper argues that modern capitalist-style development is unable to satisfy any of these three principles. A growing critique is being mounted against "free trade" and the global economy on the grounds that it increases rather than decreases the gap between rich and poor, undermines democratic decision-making processes, and is environmentally irresponsible (see, for example, Nader et al. 1993; Lang and Hines 1993; Goldsmith et al. 1995; Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Ekins 1997; Greider 1997). Capitalist development models are based on a unilinear view of cultural development (cf. Rostow 1960, Kerr et al. 1964) which assumes that developing countries should eventually "catch up" with the developed countries in terms of material affluence. This view contends that people should give up their traditional cultures and "modernize," taking developed countries such as the United States and Japan as their models. It further assumes, in a spirit reminiscent of old imperialist conceits, that since developed countries are "rich" and technologically "superior," they have a moral obligation to "help" countries which are "poor" and technologically "backward." The globalization of the economy represents a form of cultural imperialism on a global scale. Whereas the older forms of imperialism attempted to impose Western values on non-Westerners, the newer form attempts to impose first-world values on "non-first-worlders." At least two objections can be made to the catch-up model of development. First, the notion that the developing countries can eventually "catch up" with the developed countries is a biophysical impossibility. The catch-up model erroneously assumes that the earth has sufficient resources to support a growing population at standards of living that now prevail in the developed countries. The dominant value of industrial civilization is that economic growth is a good thing and that increased levels of consumption lead to greater human well-being. The success of the economy is accordingly measured by how rapidly the production of goods and services can be expanded. The bioregional paradigm questions the assumption that continued economic growth is possible, given the fact that the earth has both limited natural resources and limited

sinks to absorb the pollution generated by industrial processes. Calculations show that at least 2-4 planets would be needed to support the earth's present population at levels of consumption currently found in the developed world (Wackernagel and Rees 1996, 15).

Ecological economists contend that since current rates of economic growth are clearly unsustainable over the long-term, it is impossible for everyone in the world to enjoy ever-rising levels of material affluence. We cannot, moreover, rely on "technological advances" to save us. In the 1972 book *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology demonstrated through computer simulations that even if we could double the present energy supply, recycle 75% of other resources, reduce pollution to one-fourth its present level, double agricultural production, and make effective means of birth control universally available, economic collapse within the next century could not be avoided. An update of *The Limits to Growth* published in 1992 (Meadows et al. 1992) largely confirmed the results of the earlier study but argued that present levels of economic growth have already pushed us "beyond the limits" of ecological sustainability.

Together with *The Limits to Growth*, the bioregional paradigm suggests that global collapse can be avoided only if concerted efforts are made to give up the pursuit of economic growth and the "catch-up" model of development. Bioregionalism is by no means opposed to technological innovation, nor does it advocate a return to Neanderthal lifestyles. It simply argues that economic production should be brought now within the parameters of sustainability made available by existing technology rather than placing faith in the ability of technological advances that do not yet even exist to save us from ecological collapse.

The goals of bioregionalism are consistent with those set forth by the economist Herman E. Daly (1991, 1996), who argues that we need to move towards a "steady-state" economy in which resources are not used up faster than they can be replenished and pollution is not generated more rapidly than the earth can absorb it. A steady-state economy would discourage people from indulging in luxurious, overconsumptive lifestyles and focus instead on providing for the basic material needs of all on a more or less equitable basis. While affluent people in the world would be asked to give up unnecessary consumption, a steady-state economy would insure that everyone on the planet had access to adequate housing, food, health care, and education—things which many of the world's poor do not enjoy even in today's high-growth economy.

The second objection to the modern development paradigm is that it is simply not working. Despite the fact that development assistance has increased from \$1.8 billion per year in the early 1950s to more than \$60 billion per year at present (Hancock 1989, 43 and 187), the gap between rich and poor is actually growing. In 1960 the richest 20% of the world's population had 30 times more wealth than the poorest 20%; in 1994 the figure was 78 times more ("Some sobering facts and figures" 1997). Bioregional critics of development point out that development projects are often the cause of, rather than the solution to, poverty. Many case studies could be cited in support of this claim (see, for example, Chatterjee 1994; Greer and Bruno 1996).

The creation of a "global market" based on "free trade" ultimately serves the interests of first- and third-world elites more than it does the interests of non-elites. Multinational corporations frequently close down factories in developed countries and reopen them in developing countries to take advantage of low taxes, lax environmental regulations, and cheap labor. Corporate profits skyrocket at the same time that thousands of first-world workers lose their

jobs and tax revenues for social services are cut. While business elites in the third world also profit from such ventures, third-world workers are often forced to endure working conditions similar to those described in the novels of Charles Dickens. The combination of exploitive working conditions and global "free trade" policies leads to competitive pressure which also drives down wages and benefits in first-world countries. Workers in both the North and the South are engaged in what has been described as a "race to the bottom" (Brecher and Costello 1994; Korten 1995).

In the context of a global market economy, goods are produced not for those who need them but rather for those who have the money to buy them. The poor, of course, often do not have enough money to buy even essential goods. At present the richest fifth of the world's population receives approximately 82.7% of the world's wealth while the poorest fifth receives only 1.4% (Reid 1995, 7). Much of the discrepancy can be blamed on increased globalization. The economies of many developing countries now depend on exporting natural resources, agricultural products, and manufactured goods to developed countries. In other words, the poor are not extracting resources, growing food, or making products for themselves, but rather for the benefit of people in developed countries. In export-driven economies imbalances are created in which the siphoning off of labor and goods from developing countries to developed countries leaves the poor with insufficient resources to meet their own basic needs. It is not difficult to see why developed countries, which make up only about one-fourth of the earth's population, consume about three-fourths of the earth's resources at a rate per capita that is 15 times that of most people living in the developing countries (Trainer 1985, 3).

The poor in developing countries are increasingly rejecting the idea that their resources and labor should be used to subsidize the overconsumptive lifestyles of affluent individuals in both the North and South. Alternative development paradigms consistent with bioregional principles (see, for example, Dag Hammarskjöld Institute 1975; Galtung 1980; Trainer 1989; Max-Neef 1991; Dube 1988; Rahman 1993; Burkey 1993) suggest that citizens in both developed and developing countries should use their resources, agricultural productivity, and labor to meet basic human needs at the local level. Communities can "delink" themselves from the global economy (Amin 1990) by achieving greater economic self-sufficiency and greater political autonomy. By refusing to ship resources and wealth to developed countries, the poor would be able to provide for their own basic human needs in a socially just and environmentally sustainable manner. In the North, meanwhile, there have been increasing calls for developed countries to engage in a process of "de-development" (Trainer 1985). As early as 1972 *A Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith et al. 1972) suggested that affluent Northern societies should limit both economic and population growth and try instead to create decentralized communities based on the concept of self-sufficiency. Similar views have been advanced by Green Party activists (Porritt 1984; Bahro 1984, 1986; 1994) and advocates of deindustrialization (Goldsmith 1988; Kassiola 1990; McLaughlin 1993).

In the bioregional model, levels of wealth could rise slightly in developing countries-i.e., to levels sufficient to meet basic needs-while levels of wealth in the developed countries would fall since they would no longer be able to exploit the labor or resources of developing countries. Ted Trainer suggests that the overaffluent should reduce their per capita resource consumption at least 80% so that everyone can share the earth's resources in an equitable and sustainable way (1985, 248-249). The result would be a rough parity between North and South at levels of material affluence that both meet basic human needs and are ecologically

sustainable. In the words of a popular slogan, the rich must learn to live more simply so the poor can simply live.

The capitalist development paradigm permits a minority of the world's people to enjoy wealth and luxury, but only by forcing others into dehumanizing poverty, creating unjust inequalities between rich and poor, and destroying the environment. The capitalist development paradigm therefore fails to satisfy any of the three ethical principles presented earlier in this paper. A bioregional approach, to the contrary, would satisfy these principles. There is no doubt that asking developed countries to drastically reduce overconsumption and developing countries to curb their aspirations for development will not be popular, but the bioregional paradigm is hardly utopian. It is based on an eminently realistic assessment of how basic human needs can be globally satisfied in a socially just and ecologically responsible way. Rather, it is the capitalist development paradigm with its unfulfillable promise that everyone on the planet can duplicate the overconsumptive lifestyles of the affluent North which is utopian and unrealistic.

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