

ECOCENTRIC IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATORY POLITICS

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Abstract

The potential, and the dangers, of attempts to create a transformatory politics based on ecocentric identity are the focus of this article. As a prelude to assessment of competing approaches to ecocentric identity from the perspectives of ecofeminism and bioregionalism, the functions of human identity and the dynamics of identity construction are considered, as are the circumstances under which identity can be politicised. It is argued that, in promoting ways of living in the world which are both ecologically sound and socially just, great care must be taken to avoid the dangers of particularism and ethnic exclusion potentially associated with an ecocentric identity.

An examination of the potential for the development and politicisation of ecocentric identities reflects the belief that the scale and scope of the contemporary environmental crisis demands a genuinely transformatory project - involving changes to the behaviour, values and consciousness of a substantial proportion of the earth's peoples. Assessment of the possibilities, and dangers, involved in the construction and politicisation of ecocentric identities as a source of mobilisation in defence of the environment is the principal concern of this discussion. First, however, two key issues are considered - the functions and dynamics of human identity construction and the relative strengths and weaknesses of potential sources of ecocentric identity.

Identification and Identity Politics

For most individuals, identification with various forms of human collectivity, or with established sets of values and principles, fulfils important human needs. Indeed the ability to see oneself within a larger context is fundamentally important in providing a sense of wider meaning and purpose. It represents, as Geertz (1973, p.258) has argued, "a social assertion of the self 'as being somebody in the world.'" Thus, an important aspect of

identification is the desire to overcome loneliness through a sense of belonging; and to find significance beyond the compass of individual experience.

The construction of identity is assumed to be a lifelong process involving internal and external referents: the self is constituted both of what one considers oneself to be and what one believes to be “other”. The extent to which difference, or differentiation from others, is central to identity is a contested area, however. Clearly there are merits in Bikhu Parekh's (1995, p.256) argument that “identity is logically and ontologically prior to difference”. Nevertheless, while difference or negative identification cannot of itself form the basis of identity, the construction of boundaries around identity groups and the establishment of eligibility criteria play an important role in according significance to group members. Thus, Stuart Hall (1996, p.5) maintains that “identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, leave out, to render outside”(emphasis in original). Since an ecocentric identification does not depend to any great extent, if at all, upon reference to an external other, this issue has considerable significance for the present discussion.

In complex contemporary societies, individuals encounter a range of identity sources although are not free randomly to choose their identities. Given the salience of skin colour to some forms of collective identification, Hobsbawm (1996, p.38) surely goes too far in asserting that “identities are like shirts rather than skin”. Individuals should, rather, be considered as more or less knowledgeable agents involved in a creative process of identity construction, in which personal preference interacts with structural factors governing the availability of various identities. Thus, identity is, in part, a function of eligibility. It derives from membership of a social group or organisation, or espousal of a set of values and ideas held in common by a number of others. Sources of identity are many. They include, amongst others, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, a political organisation or ideology, a religion, a state, region or city, a football team. As an alternative, or in addition to these social (anthropocentric) sources of identity, it is proposed that individuals may achieve a broader and potentially more fulfilling ecocentric identification.

The availability of a range of identity sources is not necessarily experienced by individuals as problematic or destabilising; multi-faceted identities are the norm in complex societies. Such identities become problematic only if major incompatibilities arise between their components. In such circumstances, those attempting to politicise identity would demand that a choice be made and a superordinate loyalty declared, since “identity politics assumes that one among the many identities we all have is the one that determines, or at least dominates our politics” (Hobsbawm 1996, p.41). The key to development of an ecocentric identity thus becomes the ability, and willingness, to reconceptualise one’s own place (and that of human beings as a species) within the ecosystems of which we are a part. Politicisation of such an identity would demand that we pursue action consistent with the belief that the whole must take precedence over the parts.

As a prelude to assessing the potential of alternative sources of ecocentric identification, we consider the extent to which traditional approaches facilitate

conceptualisation of an identity politics based neither upon the attribution of superior characteristics to group members, nor upon the exclusion of others, but which nevertheless demands high levels of commitment.

Approaches to Identity Politics

Traditional thinking about the nature and potential of identity politics can be broadly divided into two schools, primordialist and rationalist. Rationalists offer a materialist treatment of identity, which emphasises the contingent and multi-faceted nature of contemporary identities. This perspective rejects essentialist treatments of identity based on ethnicity. In modern societies, for rationalists, affective ties of kinship are largely replaced by pragmatic (even instrumental) associations. Thus, identification with cosmopolitan or universal ideas/movements is capable of supplanting more particularistic identities. In consequence, differentiation from an alien other is not a necessary feature of identity.

From the perspective of constructing an ecocentric and essentially connected identity, rationalism's lack of exclusivity has positive implications. Nevertheless, rationalist universalism rests firmly upon notions of individual human worth; it falls far short of the fundamental sense of interconnectedness between all life forms implied by an ecocentric identity. Moreover, attachment to one's home place, which could provide a point of departure for the development of an ecocentric identity, is de-emphasised in rationalist thought. Instead there is focus upon the significance of time/space compression and associated opportunities for mobility (both actual and virtual) in loosening emotional attachments to particular places. Thus, it is argued, in fast-moving contemporary societies "There is a continual smudging of personas and lifestyles, depending upon where we are and the spaces we are moving between. It is the speed, the fluidity with which these identities mingle and overlap which makes any notion of fixed subjects seem more and more anachronistic - distinctly early 20th century" (Mort, 1989, p.169).

From this perspective, identification with green causes (in the Western societies implied by this discussion) relates to a significant extent to lifestyle. Thus, a strong association can be traced between adherence to green causes and the post-material values of the "new middle class" (Hannigan, 1995). This may reflect an expression of self, and presentation of the self to others, as fashionable or non-conformist. Additionally, protection or improvement of the environment is likely to produce aesthetically pleasing outcomes or otherwise enhance the quality of human life.

Ultimately, rationalist universalism privileges human well-being over the survival of other species. Moreover its emphasis upon the contingent and shifting nature of identification is uncondusive to the demands, in terms of commitment (even self-sacrifice) implied by an ecocentric identification and an associated transformatory politics.

In contrast, notions of commitment and sacrifice are at the centre of primordialists' considerations. From this perspective, while there may be acceptance that identification can be multi-faceted, there is believed to be a deep, central core of identity which is instinctive.

Consequently a politics of identity cannot be a matter of choosing a superordinate identity. Primordial ties are particularistic, enduring and potentially infused with passion; and, by definition, their claim upon allegiance is prior to and takes precedence over all other potential sources of identity. In consequence the significant qualitative differences between identity sources cannot be dismissed through “repeated use of the frivolous clichés of the day, such as ‘socially constructed’” (Grosby, 1994, p.169).

For primordialists, the essential core of identity derives from kinship and locality, the family and the familiar, blood and soil. Emotional attachment to home and family is regarded as extending relatively unproblematically to identification with a people and willingness to die in defence of a homeland. For primordialists, collective ethno-national identities are strongly associated with processes of differentiation from and assumptions of superiority over alien others. From this perspective Plato's description of the Athenians “by nature hating the barbarians” has broad, if not universal, application.

Individual identification with a kinship group, a region or a people involves not only a sense of belonging but also of ownership; creating an extended “horizon of ownness”(Grosby, 1994, p. 165). This suggests the potential for an identity politics mobilised to defend the environment of one's locality, region or home place; but precludes a broader ethic of concern for complex and interrelated ecosystems beyond the borders of the home place. Primordialists provide no satisfactory solution to pressing transborder or global environmental problems.

Our discussion of identity politics has so far provided only a broad context for consideration of potential forms of ecocentric identity. Neither primordialism (with its focus upon ethnicity and home place) nor rationalism (with its focus upon the quality of human life) has proposed that the ecological dimension be prioritised over the human as a source of identity. It is to deep ecology that we must turn to find perspectives which do propose such a prioritisation.

Deep Ecology and Identity Politics

The notion of deep ecology is here employed to encompass a number of perspectives which reject the anthropocentric, rationalist/materialist assumptions of Western Enlightenment thought. Deep ecology provides an ecocentric approach which

In terms of fundamental principles...regards the question of our proper place in the rest of nature as logically prior to the question of what are the most appropriate social and political arrangements for human communities. That is social and political questions must proceed from, or at least be consistent with, an adequate determination of this more fundamental question (Eckersley, 1992, p.28).

From this principle there derives a need radically to reassess the position of humans as a species which has no greater intrinsic value than any other but is unique in its capacity to abuse and exploit others. Accordingly, there is a related need for a reordering of human behaviour, in all its facets, in order to reflect the true position of humans and enable them to live in harmony with non-human species and the ecosystems of which they form a part.

The implications of an ecocentric approach are profound. Ecocentrism challenges the organising principles of social, political and economic life as well as the value systems which sustain them in many societies. It also challenges deeply entrenched cultural/religious understandings concerning what it means to be a human being; a member of a superior species, at the pinnacle of the evolutionary process and answerable only to other humans, or perhaps the gods. Thus, to repudiate notions of human superiority necessitates a fundamental reassessment of the nature of the self, of the internal and external referents of one's own identity. Despite its ecocentrism, deep ecology is centrally concerned with human consciousness and human identity, and its prescriptions are entirely consistent with notions of identity politics in which a dominant identification is appealed to and acted upon. The words of Theodore Roszak (quoted in Eckersley, 1992, p.19) illustrate this very clearly.

My purpose is to suggest that the environmental anguish of the Earth has entered our lives as a radical transformation of human identity. The needs of the planet and the needs of the person have become one, and together they have begun to act upon the central institutions of society with a force that is profoundly subversive...

An ecocentric approach to identity invites individuals to perceive themselves not simply as members of various human social groupings but as an integral part of a much larger whole, as components of a fundamentally interlinked, and interdependent, "web of nature" (Merchant, 1992, p.86). This holistic relationship between the self and the cosmos may appear to imply loss of individuality, autonomy and self esteem. In practice, however, seeing the self as part of the cosmos would entail a widening of the sense of self, and an expansion in the scope of identity. This would be similar to but much greater than that experienced through identification with a people or nation. Moreover, by ending the fundamental alienation of human beings from their true selves and promoting "an ineffable sense of at-homeness in Nature, and a disposition to live in harmony with it", an eco-identity brings freedom from the "tyranny of personal desires" and opportunities to experience a deep sense of peace and joy (Mathews, 1991, p.150).

In terms of the current understandings of many human societies, the principles of deep ecology resemble those of a religion. Thus, in contrast with the material benefits typically sought by ethnic groups or nations, an ecocentric identification offers contentment and spiritual fulfilment. Ecocentrism is nevertheless regarded by many of its proponents as truly emancipatory, both spiritually *and* socially - in the sense that it would end both alienation and domination in human societies. This reflects the basis of an ecocentric identity as identification *with*. There is neither requirement nor space for alien others, nor can there be

claims of superiority over others. Acceptance of the equal worth of all life forms (and the essential interrelatedness and interdependence of the ecosystems of which they form a part) would inevitably involve, in human society, rejection of all forms of domination and exploitation. This reflects the central belief that both environmental crisis and social malaise are a result of humans' alienation from the natural world.

Inevitably, perhaps, this conclusion has been contested, both from outside and within the deep ecology movement, on the grounds that it is based upon inadequate understanding of the principles of social organisation. From those outside deep ecology, criticism has focused upon the failure to appreciate the strength and endurance of social institutions. This is seen to reflect a naive romanticism which is ultimately socially conservative. Thus for social ecologist Murray Bookchin (1982) the central shortcoming of deep ecology is the failure to analyse and address the principles of hierarchy and associated patterns of injustice which afflict human societies. A similar point, at the level of practical politics, is made by the environmental justice movement in the USA which has focused upon the disproportionate extent to which toxic waste and other environmental hazards affect low status neighbourhoods. It is interesting to note the opening sentence of a recent work entitled *Justice and the Environment*: "One of the principal curiosities of modern environmentalism is how little it has had to say on the issue of distributive justice" (Dobson, 1998, p.12).

Criticisms of the failure to adequately take account of social structure and organisation can also be found within the deep ecology movement itself. Thus, ecofeminist perspectives offer both an explicit critique and an alternative analysis which emphasises the gendered structures of power and inequality underlying and legitimising disjunctures between human social organisation and ecosystemic needs. An alternative approach, which examines the relationship between socio-cultural factors and local ecosystems, is provided by bioregionalists. The focus of this perspective is upon the cultural norms and values which shape social behaviour and upon adaptation and reconciliation to enable human societies to "reinhabit" local places (Aberley, 1999, p.23). These two perspectives focus upon relationships between socio-cultural and ecological systems, offering potentially important sources of ecocentric identity.

Ecofeminist Perspectives

Ecofeminists emphasise the significant differences in nature/culture relationships between and within societies. Humans, it is argued, are not equally alienated from, and exploitative of, the natural world. Moreover, structures of social inequality are both prior to and a source of domination over nature. These structures are deeply embedded and will not simply dissolve as a consequence of changing human attitudes toward the natural world. Indeed, there is a need to direct considerable effort toward dismantling unequal social structures in order to bring about the changes in human values and behaviour necessary for the development of an ecocentric identity.

Ecofeminists share many of the premises of deep ecology in that they reject rationalist/materialist assumptions in favour of a holistic, ecocentric worldview. However, their analysis of the causes of and solutions to the environmental crisis differs considerably from that of deep ecology. For ecofeminists it is a central contention that gendered structures of power, reflected in men's almost universal domination over women spring from the same roots as domination and exploitation of the natural world. Thus, for ecofeminists

The primary manifestation of the relationship between humans and nature is the way a society sees men and women. Most cultures associate women with nature..and men with humanness, which is seen as a condition permitting transcendence - superiority over, freedom from, control of nature (French, 1985, p.xvi).

From this perspective the domination and exploitation of women and of nature derives from gendered (masculine) values which emphasise individual instrumental rationality. However, an ecofeminist reconceptualisation of rationality would reflect values associated with women's lives, in particular their experience of vulnerability and interdependence. Such a reconceptualisation would emphasise mutually supportive, cooperative behaviour, expressed through the idea of communal rationality. This concept has considerable importance for the creation of an ethic of care for the environment and for the development of an ecocentric identity which reflects women's lived experience. This contrasts with the masculine notion of rationality employed in Hardin's (1968) apocalyptic metaphor of the "tragedy of the commons", in which the profit-maximising behaviour attributed to Hardin's metaphorical herds~~men~~ inevitably led to the destruction of the medieval commons. In this context traditional definitions of rationality seem perverse. Had the communal values of herds~~women~~ prevailed the "global commons" would not now be so imperilled (Bretherton, 1996, p.108). A practical example is provided by Vandana Shiva (1988) who discusses, in the context of India, the designation of commons as "wasteland" available for development and the important efforts, led by women, to preserve the traditional commons and their indigenous ecosystems.

Communal rationality, involving a set of values derived from women's lived experience, provides only the starting point for development of an ecocentric identity. Of particular significance for ecofeminists is women's experience, shared with the natural world, of exploitation and oppression by men (or, rather, by structures of power and production infused with norms and values socially designated as masculine). This shared experience is believed to be the source of a special affinity, even a certain equivalence, between women and the natural world.

For many ecofeminists, this view is associated with a maternalist perspective in which women and the earth are equated, and revered, as givers and nurturers of life. While aspects of maternalist thinking persist in most societies, the perception of the earth as a living being, a mother, has been almost completely lost in Western developed societies. Historian of science Carolyn Merchant (1982) has documented changing European attitudes towards the

natural world, and towards women, from the 16th Century onwards. She illustrates the gradual rejection of a holistic worldview in favour of a dualistic system of thought in which (female) nature became divorced from (male) culture. In some non-western cultures, however, maternalist perceptions of the earth continue to influence the behaviour of humans, both women and men. Examples are provided by Marglin and Mishra (1993) who document, again in the context of India, vibrant maternalist cultures whose practices directly reflect an ethic of care for the Earth as mother. And for ecofeminists, recovery of a spiritual relationship with the Earth is essential to an ecocentric worldview, and to the future wellbeing of the planet for "one does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body" (Merchant, 1982, p.3).

The implications of ecofeminist ideas for human identity are numerous. For women, particularly those (primarily Western) women who have become alienated from the natural world, there is a need to rediscover their "natural" ecocentric/ecofeminine identification. Ecofeminism thus posits, for women, an essentialist ecocentric identity. This would involve not a loss or negation of the self but an opportunity to experience the fulfilment of recovering one's true maternal nature and to embrace the responsibilities associated with identification as a saviour of the planet.

To some extent women have appeared to take up these responsibilities. In many parts of the world they have undoubtedly contributed significantly to environmental activism. Moreover, a number of women's environmental organisations have espoused overtly ecofeminist principles (Bretherton 1996). Indeed, Mies and Shiva (1993, p.3) claim, from their conversations with women's groups in many parts of the world, "women, worldwide, felt the same anger and anxiety, and the same sense of responsibility to preserve the bases of life, and to end its destruction." However, this raises the danger that women, who are everywhere the least powerful members of society, might be expected to assume disproportionate responsibility for cleaning up men's messes. Rather, an ecocentric identification demands that the "feminine" qualities of cooperation and nurturance be valued and embraced by all members of societies. It demands, too, that the "masculine" qualities of competition and dominance be devalued and rejected. Consequently, it must be concluded that, in many societies, the adoption of an ecocentric identity would involve, for men, a change of consciousness very much more fundamental than that required of women. While the major focus of an ecofeminine identity is positive identification with the natural world, there are implicitly elements of an identity defined negatively against the alien other of unreconstructed "masculine" man.

Because of its implied exclusivity, which reflects a tendency towards maternalist essentialism, ecofeminism is unlikely to provide the basis for a universal ecocentric identity. Ecofeminism is important, nevertheless. It provides a trenchant critique of those cultural norms and values which support the power structures of contemporary societies and which have facilitated the development of a dangerously dysfunctional relationship between human collectivities and the ecosystems of which they are a part. In focusing very specifically upon this latter issue, bioregionalists would be well advised to incorporate feminist insights

concerning the origin, and persistence, of gendered structures of power (Plumwood 1994; Bretherton 1998).

Bioregionalism

While sharing the general principles of deep ecology, the central concern of bioregionalists is with praxis. They aim to develop a strong ecological consciousness and identification based upon a specific sense of place - of belonging to and forming part of the local ecosystems associated with a bioregion. Thus, while all ecocentric approaches place emphasis upon the importance of local communities and their relationships with local ecosystems, bioregionalism is alone in its attempt to delineate specific regions and closely examine related patterns of human behaviour. There is, however, no narrow specification of criteria for defining a bioregion; rather its boundaries can be expected to emerge through the understandings and practices of human collectivities as they become attuned to the needs of local ecosystems (Aberley, 1999, p.23). In practice, bioregions tend to be defined both geographically (in terms, for example, of watershed or vegetation type) and culturally (in terms of the human value systems and practices associated with the region).

The emphasis placed by bioregionalists upon the social and cultural dimensions of human interaction is a further departure from deep ecology. There has been a tendency in deep ecological thought to regard culture negatively, in terms of ideas and values which set human beings above nature and, hence, legitimise its domination and exploitation. This is particularly evident among ecofeminists who regard the separation of (female) nature from male (culture) as fundamental to the post-Enlightenment, dualist systems of thought which underlie patriarchy. For bioregionalists, however, culture is a central aspect of human experience which mediates between social and natural systems. It is argued that "...bioregionalism originates in culture, is contingent on context and history, and on people's connections to place and the natural world..." (McGinnis, 1999, p.5). The key issue is therefore to strengthen, or revive, those cultural norms and values which are conducive to a harmonious relationship between human societies and local ecosystems.

A central contention of bioregionalists is that, in the past, cultural values were well adapted to the needs of local places; and that, today, such cultural adaptation is revealed in the value systems and practices of indigenous peoples. In much of the contemporary world, however, the values and practices associated with modernisation, and in particular the development of industrial capitalism, have caused a damaging estrangement of culture from nature. Nevertheless, our understanding of how to live in, rather than with, nature is not completely lost, rather it is deeply buried in cultural memory, so that "Knowledge of place, within us, needs to be uncovered and revered" (McGinnis, 1999, p.9).

The central priority for bioregionalists is the cultural and social adaptation of human communities to accord with the needs and characteristics of the bioregion. This is to be achieved through a process of "reinhabitation", which involves "becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and

around it" (Berg & Dasmann quoted in Eckersley, 1992, p.167). This involves "a kind of ecological citizenship, in which individuals learn to become respectful citizens of an ecological place, rather than transforming the place to suit themselves" (Dryzek, 1997, p.160). Through this learning process, the norms and values of human collectivities will gradually adapt to the needs of local ecosystems. This, it is believed, will inevitably lead to increased cultural homogeneity among the communities which inhabit a particular bioregion. Given the diversity of the earth's regions, however, the cultural homogenisation said to occur within a bioregion would tend to be associated with increased differentiation between regions.

Bioregionalism can be seen both as a way of thinking and a way of living. While many of the ideas expressed by bioregionalists might be characterised as naive "anarchic primitivism" (Aberley, 1999, p.27), there is also a pragmatic acceptance of the need to adapt to present circumstances - not least because it is through experience that learning will occur. Consequently bioregionalists have not formally contested existing political boundaries, despite the fact that these frequently traverse or dissect bioregions. Rather, sets of "bioregional overlays" have been proposed, for the guidance of local community action. Comprising ecological/cultural boundaries of bioregions, it is hoped that these might be suggestive of "alternative political boundaries" in the future, as new ways of living become established (Klyza, 1999, p.92).

In describing bioregionalist experiments in Vermont, USA, Klyza (1999) paints an optimistic picture, although he admits that successes in Vermont reflect the post-industrial context in which they have occurred. Since living standards have remained high, ecological restoration in Vermont has been achieved at the expense of increased exploitation elsewhere. This raises a key question, "What is our responsibility for problems caused beyond our bioregion by our consumption and production?" (Klyza, 1999, p.94).

It is evident that considerable cooperation would be required between bioregions in the interest of safeguarding larger ecosystems and in order to address distributional issues flowing from unequal access, among bioregions, to life sustaining natural resources such as water. Bioregionalists answer this problem with the hope that "The experience of collective action on behalf of the local environment can serve to instill an ethic that will apply outside of that locality" (Lipschutz, 1999, p.111).

Despite this, there is a danger that the bioregionalist appeal to a local ecocentric identity resonates too closely with the primordialist emphasis upon affective identification with the known or familiar, which has as its corollary exclusion of the unknown and unfamiliar. It is stressed by bioregionalists that their concern is with the development of a sense of rootedness that is "biotic, not merely ethnic" (Morris Bergman, quoted in Eckersley, 1992, p.168). Nevertheless, there remains a potential, in many parts of the world, for politicisation of a sense of place along ethnic lines. In the early 1990s, for example, anti-Soviet movements in the Baltic Republics consciously linked concerns over environmental degradation with a heightened sense of place and extreme nationalism in a manner

reminiscent of the “blood and soil” movement of Nazi Germany (Tickle and Welsh, 1998, p.158).

Undoubtedly it remains possible for an exclusionary ethnic dimension to develop alongside, and coexist with, an ecological identity. with the further potential for politicisation of this aspect of identity should conflicts of interest arise between bioregions. An example, given the inevitability of unequal resource availability between regions, might be drought migration. There is a need to question the extent to which an influx of “outsiders” can be tolerated by communities which have become culturally homogenous through adaptation to local ecosystems. Ethnic closure against outsiders is clearly a possibility, not least because it would serve to defend the local bioregion. Indeed this is implied by the emphasis upon reverence only for *indigenous* life forms, underscored by the slightly chilling assertion that “plans to remove ‘non-native’ plants or animals...are widespread” (McGinnis, House & Jordan III, 1999, p.214). Alternatively, unchecked migration might lead to dilution of the locally based ethic of care for the bioregion. Evidence of problems arising from migration into Central American communities is worthy of note:

...this effort at community-based natural resource management is confounded by several factors that are predicates for bioregional management. The influx of new residents to the region has diluted the community cohesiveness that would appear to be a requisite for community management. These communities lack the degree of cultural identity and intergenerational commitment typically found in indigenous communities (Ankersen, 1999, p.181).

As in the case of ecofeminism, bioregionalism displays both strengths and weaknesses. At grassroots level, bioregionalism has strong advantages in that it provides a framework for experiments in “living in nature” which could prove an important focus for social learning and for replication. Even more than ecofeminism, bioregionalism implies an exclusionary identification whose explicitly local focus raises important questions about the ability to address transregional or global issues. The bioregionalist emphasis upon cultural factors, while celebrating an important aspect of human experience, tends to divert attention from the structures of power in society. Bioregionalists tend to be middle class, white men who have little to say about the social divisions of race, class and gender. Their focus upon localised ecocentric identification emphasises the position of humans within the broader ecosystem, and there is a clear prioritisation of ecological imperatives over social justice. While the power relations which underpin the operation of inequitable social systems remain unquestioned and unaddressed, an ecocentric identification is unlikely to be widely attainable. The social divisions within the broader environmental movement are graphically illustrated by Lois Gibbs, spokeswoman for the environmental justice movement in the USA, “Environmentalists are people who eat yoghurt, while my people drink Budweiser and smoke” (Quoted in Dryzek, 1997, p.178).

Ecocentrism and Politicisation

Identity politics, it has been argued, involves the prioritisation of one particular facet of identity over others in a manner that influences political choices and potentially provides a basis for political action. Discussion of the potential for a politicised ecocentric identity began with the assumption that the contemporary environmental crisis demands a transformatory project, involving changes to the way in which individuals (primarily) in industrialised countries perceive, and act upon, their position in/relationship with the natural world. Such a change in consciousness would demand a reorientation and politicisation of identity in order to prioritise ecologically functional ways of being and to construct societies whose shared norms and values are conducive to a harmonious relationship between nature and culture.

The political programmes advocated by proponents of ecocentrism focus primarily upon the lifestyle of individuals and communities, in terms of “authenticity” (simplicity, “naturalness”) for the self, and example to others. For deep ecologists, “politics is not about devising strategies to achieve tangible goals; rather it is an arena in which different kinds of experiences can be sought and developed” (Dryzek 1997, p.155). An ecocentric identity and associated ways of living become not simply the means, but also the desired end, of deep green politics. From this perspective, the future of the planet is a matter of strong personal commitment, so that the capacity of this “politics of identity” to extend its influence becomes crucial.

A politics of identity reflecting ecocentric principles is likely to encounter numerous obstacles. Many of these are inherent in ecocentrism as a system of ideas which is intimately connected to the political prescriptions of ecocentrism as practice. The ideas underlying ecocentrism are essentially romantic; that is, they reflect the belief that “nature and humanity belong in an organic relationship best understood and developed through feeling and insight” (Dryzek, 1997, p.155). Thus, ecocentrism, in its various guises, expresses both a preference for emotion over reason and an essentialist view of human nature. It is at odds with rationalist modernist and post-modern conceptions of identities as relatively fluid and processual. Ecocentrism’s rejection of contemporary cultural values also seriously underestimates their attractiveness. In many societies self realisation through an ecocentric identification would involve rejection of the central components of existing identities including, *inter alia*, works of art and the architecture of great cities which might be regarded as among the major achievements of human culture. For many individuals this radical change of values and of consciousness would undoubtedly be perceived in terms of sacrifice and loss; indeed, it is arguable that “human beings everywhere rank their own cultural products above the realm of the physical world” (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.6).

A romantic rejection of cultural achievements, and in particular the scientific values of modern societies, is evident in both ecofeminist and bioregionalist thinking. These perspectives share a desire to recreate the values of a past age when, variously, maternal thinking or the instinctive knowledge of indigenous peoples enabled human societies to live

in harmony with the natural world. For bioregionalists, this focus has tended to obscure the need to identify the causes of contemporary social malaise and to develop a critique of the structures of domination and inequality characteristic of ecologically dysfunctional modern societies. In contrast, ecofeminists emphasise the mechanisms through which patterns of gender differentiation determine the power structures and value systems responsible for the contemporary separation of human societies from the natural world. In short, for ecofeminists, ecocentrism and *social* justice are inextricably linked.

This difference between ecofeminist and bioregionalist perspectives has implications for practice, in that bioregionalist experiments in “living in nature” are relatively untroubled by concerns over distributive justice. Such experiments are also facilitated by their localized nature. A further distinction is evident between the two perspectives. While ecofeminism would exclude men (and women) unsympathetic to its values, bioregionalism raises the unhappy prospect of a localised identification degenerating into a reactionary and defensive politics of ethnic enclosure.

Such negative outcomes are not inevitable. Ecocentrism, in common with many religious sources of identification, appeals to an identity politics based on love, inescapable duty and potential sacrifice. For the human individual, the rewards offered by religious identification are significant. They include not only a sense of membership in a wider community but also of continuity with the past, and hope for the future, which serves to assuage the knowledge of human mortality. In this respect, ecocentrism offers comparable, potentially even greater rewards, since an ecocentric identification would be deeply satisfying to these human needs. The apparent eclipsing or immersion of the self within the greater whole (whether this involves taking one's place in the ecosystems of the bioregion or the biosphere) is not experienced as a loss; rather it involves self-realisation, becoming fully alive. For Freya Mathews (1991, p.150), ecological identification involves more than spiritual experience and commitment:

...this love of Nature is no pale intellectual shadow of love, but the real thing... This loving of the world is a blissful state which warms and animates everything around us... It bursts the bars of the personal heart, and vastly expands our sense of self.

Despite such protestations, appeals to an ecocentric identification do not fit neatly into romantic/rationalist or Hegelian/cosmopolitan categorisations. Bioregionalism, and to a lesser extent ecofeminism, move towards reconciling the romantic and the rational by permitting the inclusion of socio-cultural dimensions of identity. Bioregionalism, in particular, evokes notions of *Gemeinschaft* as an alternative to the competing options of Hegelianism and cosmopolitanism as foci for human identity. In consequence, bioregionalism differs from deep ecology in ways that enable it to “straddle green romanticism and green rationalism” (Dryzek, 1997, p.160).

Ultimately romantic (ecocentric) attachments and rational self-interest can and must be reconciled. Indeed, in the most fundamental sense, they are already compatible. Affective

identification with, and an associated ethic of care for, the natural world are crucial to human survival. This is clearly expressed in the words of (the late) Czech activist Josef Vavroušek (Quoted in Welsh and Tickle, 1998, p.11):

It is in the basic interest of all human beings to have clean air and water, unspoiled soils, healthy forests and conserved natural resources, biological diversity, the beauty of harmonious land-scape and many other gifts of nature. And this is also our responsibility, not only for future generations of humanity, but for all living beings as well as non-living elements of nature.

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