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Development, Environment and Global Dysfunction: Towards Sustainable Recovery


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Development, Environment and Global Dysfunction is an interesting book, but not an entirely successful one. It is repetitive, reiterating the same points over and over in slightly different language, with little supporting evidence until the second-last chapter. The gist of the book is the author's argument that Modernization is responsible for two related phenomena: Hyper-Growth and Destruction of Life-Place. Although these fruits of modernization tend to be distributed unequally, hyper-growth characterizing northern nations and destruction of life-places southern ones, they do not manifest themselves in a mutually exclusive way. Each can be found on either side of the North-South divide. They are twin products of a core-periphery relationship based on (neo-)colonial and industrial exploitation.

This dynamic has resulted in a loss of capacity for endogenous development, particularly in the Third World. As Gottlieb sees it, the legacy of colonialism and of North-South exploitation has reproduced itself in miniature in the post-colonial nation-state, which especially in the Third World has its own core-periphery relationships, reproducing the modernization dialectic in the interests of local and foreign elites.

In Gottlieb's view, there are such things as authentic ethnic regions, which he sees as being largely coterminous with ecoregions. However, they have been fragmented and submerged, first by colonialism and then by the modern nation-state, which took over the colonial boundaries and modernization project holus-bolus. Gottlieb sees little hope for ecologically sensitive development that corresponds with the social and cultural needs and aspirations of ordinary people so long as the nation-state puzzle map remains superimposed over a deeper ethnocultural and ecological reality. Cultural and ecological degradation are parts of a single process. They must be tackled together.

It is these ethno-ecoregions (or "life-places") which are the repository for ways of making a living in harmony with specific ecosystems. They contain indigenous knowledge, which needs to be synthesized with scientific knowledge if sustainability is to become a reality. It is only within the context of such regions that truly endogenous development can occur.

Despite the similarity of this analysis to bioregionalism, Gottlieb never mentions the concept. Instead, he terms his approach "social ecology" — acknowledging the contributions of Murray Bookchin, but infusing the label with a somewhat different content.

The first chapter in the book adds to the sketchy history offered by others of the evolution of development theory and the challenges to its dominance that
have emerged. The second chapter elaborates on Gottlieb's analysis of modernization and "global dysfunction." The third chapter, where Gottlieb reviews bodies of thought that anticipate and feed into his social ecology perspective, such as human ecology, cultural ecology, ecological anthropology, the ecosystem approach, and so on, is probably the best part of the book. It offers a deep, yet concise, description and typology, and would be useful for inclusion in related university courses.

Chapter 4 presents Gottlieb's concept of the "endogenous recovery region": his proposed alternative to standard nation-state development. Chapter 5 offers an elaboration of the hypotheses, or self-evident principles, of social ecology which are to guide the flowering of such regions.

In Chapter 6, Gottlieb finally provides an example on which to hang his analysis: that of the fragmented and long-oppressed Kurdistan. He claims a certain geographical homogeneity, namely the mountainous terrain, for the territory occupied by the Kurds, but the rather amateurish computer-generated map accompanying this chapter makes it look as if the ecoregion and the culture region do not fully coincide. The ecoregion appears more extensive. The desire by Gottlieb and the bioregionalists to see a spatial coincidence between ecological territories and cultural territories is one the reader may sympathize with but it remains unconvincingly supported.

The last chapter is a rant on the bankruptcy of modern industrial society and it seems gratuitous. It has been done a hundred times before, by authors such as Lewis Mumford.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, this book makes a contribution to development literature and to the further elaboration of a theory of regionalism and human ecology. The pity is that it is long on self-evident propositions and short on data.

As for the likelihood that Gottlieb's recovery regions will see the light of day, even Gottlieb admits the modern nation-state will resist its own dismemberment tooth and nail. One wonders if in the interim less utopian goals should not be articulated.