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CENTRALISM, DE-CENTRALISM
AND
BIO-REGIONALISM

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Two of the most important social movements in Canada today are the radical and social-democratic Left (exemplified by the Action Canada Network), and the environmental movement — in one of its more radical manifestations, as bioregionalism. At its best, the environmental movement is very concerned about the threat to sustainability posed by the growing power of the global economy and corporate capital. The Left, for its part, is coming to recognize the importance of the global ecological crisis.

Together, these two movements have common goals. Both would like to limit or even eliminate capitalism and, for the most part, both would like to see a world in which ordinary Canadians had a lot more power. These similarities notwithstanding, they differ in their evaluation of what’s needed and in their beliefs about what we should do to achieve a just, sustainable way of life.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the Left wants to retain a centralized welfare state as a bulwark against global capital. In this era when socialism no longer remains a very viable option, it’s not clear what the Left’s vision is beyond that. Nor is it clear how — without the development of an alternative economic base for people to fall back on — the welfare state will be able to resist economic blackmail by the corporations — the threat of capital flight.

The bioregionalists for their part envision a society decentralized into bioregions, with regions defined by ecological criteria largely replacing current political boundaries which are often just lines drawn on a map. Bioregions would become the focal point for human culture, politics and economics, as human societies sought to “internalize” the effects of their production and consumption within the carrying capacity of the appropriate regions. While there are good arguments for and against both positions, each by itself is deficient.

There has been a tendency by the Left to view arguments for decentralization as all of a piece, failing to distinguish between right-wing and bioregional points of view. While recognizing that proponents of decentralization should not be tarred with the same brush, we recognize that there are at least four good arguments that have been made, or could be made, by the Left for retaining strong national — and perhaps creating strong international — structures.

The first is that ecological problems manifest themselves on a variety of geographical scales, from the local to the global, with the latter taking the form of global warming and ozone depletion. It is hard to envision strong national, let alone global, action on environmental matters — involving the promulgation and enforcement of regulations — proceeding from a loose-knit gaggle of bioregions. In the future — should the powers-that-be ever become that enlightened — it may become necessary for international bodies or groups of countries to forcefully intervene or invoke sanctions against countries whose actions threaten the ecological survival of future generations.

Having said that, we acknowledge that bioregionalists do envision some sort of federation of regions, though this hasn’t yet been articulated with sufficient clarity.

A second argument is that, without national and even supranational entities (such as the European Community), it is hard to ensure a uniformity of high standards of legislation and regulation in relation to such matters as human rights, health and safety, environmental standards, social services, and gender and ethnic equality. One of the major claims of the Action Canada Network is that the devolution of more power to the provincial level would threaten equitable federal standards in the provision of social services, and would leave Canadians in a vulnerable position at a time when free trade and global competition are threatening many people’s jobs. Other groups, such as First Nations and First Nations women, have argued that devolving sovereignty to Quebec or to First Nations themselves — in the case of women afraid of on-reserve discrimination — would potentially result in a loss of collective or individual rights.

A third argument for a centralized state is that allowing countries like Canada to be “balkanized” would enable corporations, and possibly the United States, to consolidate their influence and control within the separate pieces. Historically, when one considers John A. MacDonald’s “National Policy” and the race to build a railway to the Pacific, the federal state has served as a bulwark (feeble at times) against economic and political colonialism by the Americans. It has also, of course, inflicted colonialism on First Nations peoples.

A final argument is that the state, far from being a big
bureaucratic bogeyman that bleeds civil society dry, actually has a crucial role to play to creating a favourable legislative and fiscal context for communities and grassroots movements to make social change. Examples of this were provided by the NDP legislation in Ontario that created a more "level playing field" for co-operatives and community economic development projects, or the proposed tenure reform in crown land forests in B.C. that the NDP promised if elected to a second term. Numerous other examples could be provided — from support for co-management and shared decision-making, to agricultural land reserves and wilderness set-asides. Without the kind of "leg up" these policy initiatives provide, it is often difficult for grassroots groups to make very much progress. As Alan Durning has written, "The greatest obstacle to community action is that communities cannot do it alone. Small may be beautiful, but it can also be insignificant."

As persuasive as these arguments for a centralized state are, there are an equal number of good arguments on the other side. One key argument — articulated by bioregionalists Peter Berg and others — is that "for our heads to be everywhere, our feet have to be some place." In other words, it is argued that the global ecological crisis is merely an accumulation of regional crises; that if each region lived "within its means" the global crisis would fade. Furthermore, it is argued that, in contrast with a "global monoculture" dominated by "biosphere people" (those who can consume products and culture from the world over with no sense of the social and environmental effects of that consumption), we need to re-create a world of "ecosystem people" who have a profound understanding of the impacts of their economic activity on their own immediate bioregions. By achieving a greater regional self-reliance, humans will become "plugged in" to the ecosystems that sustain their lives and will receive quick "feedback" if they over-stress regional carrying capacities.

A second argument for decentralism is that "power corrupts;" people with large amounts of power cannot be trusted with it. Even if they do have good intentions, their being removed from the "on-the-ground" realities of local communities and regions means that their "solutions" will almost always be made without a full understanding of the local context, will be inflexible, and will likely cause more harm than good. Whether dealing with environmental matters, social services, or conflict between "stakeholders," it is said that only those who have to live with the consequences of their decisions and who know the local situation intimately are in a position to come up with appropriate solutions. While the centralists tend to put their faith in a change in structures, bioregionalists tend to stress far more strongly the change in culture and attitudes (towards more community and ecologically-oriented values) that they see as a necessary aspect of achieving sustainability. These changes can only be fostered locally.

A sub-set of this argument is that "mass society" is not capable of fully tapping into or fulfilling human potential. In a society organized at a human scale, people would be able to live balanced lives — with rewarding work and adequate time to devote to family, community, and self. The global economy demands rates of mobility that undermine such a life. One way for people to "resist" the way that capitalist society organizes our lives is for people to demand to live a balanced life.

The third argument is that centralized institutions only aid and abet corporate interests, and that the only way to undermine dependence on the corporations is to build a truly new economy from the ground up — an economy that is locally-controlled and in harmony with the requirements of maintaining natural capital. However, idealistic this may sound, the argument is that the welfare state merely serves as a backstop for the irresponsibility of capitalism, and disempowers people, robbing them of their initiative and dignity. From being an "ideal", these critics would argue the welfare state is at best a stop-gap measure until more community-oriented solutions can be found.

The final argument against the centralized nation-state is that political domination is not necessarily preferable to economic domination. These critics (who are apt to be more influenced by anarchism than the Marxist or socialist Left) suggest that "relations of [centralized] authority" can be as oppressive as "relations of production" and that the history of political institutions — whether bourgeois or socialist — provides a litany of examples from censorship to repression of indigenous peoples, from enforcement of cultural and religious "norms" to rank bureaucratic indifference.

The arguments associated with decentralism tend to be those of the Left, and the arguments associated with environmentalism — or at least with bioregionalism. What they have in common, we believe, is a certain ideological rigidity. This rigidity causes them to edit out unpleasant realities that don't conform to their views. The Left believes so strongly in the need to resist the "corporate agenda" that it is willing to overlook the failures of, and the popular discontent with, the welfare state in Canada. The bioregionalists are so convinced of the need to rebuild viable human communities and economies at a bioregional scale that they are willing to overlook the fact that a bioregional utopia will not make all human problems and foibles magically disappear, just as organizing at regional and local levels will not make the multinational corporations or the American behemoth suddenly vanish.

One could argue that the bioregionalists have perhaps a better vision of where humanity needs to go in the long run, but are a little fuzzy on the exigencies we will face in the meantime, while the Left has a sense of the immediate defensive challenges, but has trouble conceptualizing what some of the deeper challenges for change may be. At the same time, both groups are guilty of linking their values or goals (their ends) too closely to specific means. The goal of the Left is social justice and the elimination of at least gross inequality. They have, over the last eighty years or more, associated the achievement of that goal with building and protecting the welfare state, at one time, merely a way station on the way to a socialist society. Bioregionalists are similarly convinced that decentralism equals sustainability, rather than investigating under what conditions decentralization may enhance or retard the struggle for sustainability. The fact that we are seeking to achieve certain ends, does not means we have to become overly wedded to certain means.

This, in turn, is related to how we envision the crises we face as a society and as a species. At one extreme is the liberal or technocratic perspective that says that inequality, poverty or ecological degradation are "problems" to be "fixed" for which no one can really be assigned blame; we just have to keep tinkering with the system until we get it right. At the other extreme are the views of those "radicals" who see all the bad things occurring on
the planet as the work of a conspiracy of rich, powerful people who are destroying the planet and plundering the earth’s people, and who must be overthrown if justice and sustainability are ever to be achieved. Social change is not just, or mainly, about people with a correct vision or ideology triumphing over the evil-doers; it is also about learning together with our fellow human beings how to track our way out of this mess. Sometimes this understanding seems to be missing on the part of some Leftists and bioregionalists alike.

In a sense, both are right. Certain groups in society do benefit enormously from oppression and exploitation and are doing an enormous amount to keep the world on its present trajectory or, at least, are doing little to stop it. At the same time, even if a “revolution” occurred tomorrow, people would still be people; there would still be too many of us; we would still find things to fight about, and we would still have a tendency to put our short-term interests before our long-term. In other words, the problems aren’t going to just disappear. We will have to do a lot of experimenting, a lot of learning. There will be no one ideology that provides us with all the answers or “magic bullets” to deal with these problems. We will have to seek both incremental and longer-term solutions simultaneously. Sometimes, we will need to assign blame and organize “against.” Other times, we will have to sit down as members of the same species, and as agents of a common future, and ask of each other: “what are we going to do?”

A final point is that people within these two movements, in different ways, understand that we can never just completely “start over”—that the institutions and practices we have evolved are never purely the result of misguided error or crass domination. Interwoven with the error and domination are the attempts by human beings to make sense of our world and to evolve the mechanisms for dealing with an ever-shifting panoply of issues and problems— a process of cultural evolution.

The bioregionalists, for instance, see in the adaptations made by First Nations peoples, and some European settlers—and the manifestations in culture of these adaptations—a recognition of the unique attributes of different ecosystems. They would have us go back to some of these “truths” and evolve new ones that are appropriate to our “obligate dependency” on nature. The Left, for its part, recognizes that the welfare state—and the division of powers between jurisdictions—are the fruits of a struggle by people to bring about a more just and less conflict-ridden world, and that these hard-won institutions and insights cannot just be thrown on the scrapheap of history. As radical as the cultural evolution envisioned by bioregionalists is, it can only succeed if it builds on this past struggle.

Each movement, in its own way, recognizes that we have to—at least to a degree—work with the “heritage,” the mechanisms and the symbols we have inherited from the past because these are the political and cultural building blocks by which human beings empower themselves and orient themselves in the struggle for a better world.

Can we approach the debate in a way that takes into account the wisdom of each position? We need to use whatever defensive advantages the centralized nation-state offers to resist the hegemony of a global economy, while at the same time recognizing that the welfare state does not, in and of itself, sufficiently empower people or tap the initiative and creativity of civil society in finding long-term solutions to our social and ecological dilem-
the same time, business interests within the party, the corporate sector and right-wing Reformers, see other possibilities.

The current crisis of the Canadian liberal welfare state reveals the implications of decentralization. The undermining of national welfare standards affecting social assistance, unemployment insurance, training programmes, education and health care, threatens to balkanize the country, pitting province against province in contests over investment, environmental and social standards. Typically, the race is to the bottom; social and environmental standards being jeopardized by concerns for budgetary restraint and investment capital — the dominant concern of those committed to a corporate agenda. The less government interference with what are seen as essentially economic matters, the better.

Some evidence of this can be found in the recently announced policy of the Government of British Columbia to place a three-month waiting period on new residents — including refugees — needing social assistance. As the federal government reduces its central responsibility for health, education and welfare — for financing and national standards — provincial and municipal governments are left to cope. In British Columbia, this has severely stressed a provincial government dealing with an influx of people needing income support. Typically — and in this case — the poor pay.

Employment opportunities — or the lack thereof — are responsible for the migration patterns of many Canadians. Why is the Lower Mainland of British Columbia currently the destination of so many Canadians seeking employment and other opportunities? The replacement of the Canada Assistance Plan by block funding, the absence of national welfare standards and the demise of equalization payments — which help make it possible for people to 'eat where they live' — threaten to pit region against region and all of us against each other. In the Lower Mainland, population pressures threaten many natural areas and ecosystems. How would bioregionalists deal with the regional differences implied in the logic of bioregionally-based and locally self-sufficient economies? Are we to post police at the door? How are we to live together?

It is no surprise that the corporate sector is in favour of decentralization. Recall the controversies over Frank McKenna of New Brunswick offering companies 'tax holidays' to relocate to the province, and the Government of British Columbia protesting against such tactics. This makes it clear why we have a revenue problem in Canada — why the resources to pay for social programs and environmental management — for initiatives essential to public welfare — have been in decline relative to spending since the 1970s. At provincial and national levels, in the face of a globalized economy and decentralized authority, we are competing for investment in a manner which undermines public programs and the resources that make them possible.

What happens when a region comes up against the global power of a transnational corporation? Changing national standards is far more complicated than having to deal with a single provincial government. Having the capacity to trade one region off against another is a valuable political asset. Corporate interests promote decentralization in the name of removing 'red tape' and of making regulatory processes more efficient. This is 'code' for removing public processes which 'put the brakes' on corporate activities with significant social and environmental consequences.

At an international level, some level of international trade, even in a world characterized by greater regional self-sufficiency, would be necessary. This begs the question as to who conducts this trade and how it is to be regulated. Much global trade is currently governed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) using the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (the GATT) as a framework. There is little doubt as to whose logic and agenda dominates the text. Perhaps, as some have suggested, we need an international people's assembly to represent the interests of ordinary people with regard to global trading, the environment and social concerns. Do we not need the collective power and responsibility of national — and even international — federations to prevent regions of the world being 'traded off' against others as human beings search for basic amenities to which they may not have access? Do we not need international standards and, subsequently, nationally and globally-constituted forums for their deliberation and administration? In countering the global corporate agenda, decentralization is a move in the wrong direction. The case for a central order of government — and even for international bodies such as the United Nations — is a strong one. While human beings increasingly lack a sense of place — an cultivated respect for nature in relation to human activity — what we need are forums to bring us together in ways which allow us to live with a sense of mutual responsibility for the planet — and for each other.

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