

Bioregionalism and Global Education: Exploring the Connections

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In response to the internationalization of industry, media, transportation, and information technology, global education has emerged as a socially responsive educational reform that addresses the adjustment needs of living in an interdependent global village.¹ At the same time, many concerned educators influenced by bioregionalism, have made concerted efforts to incorporate “place-based knowledge” into the formal curriculum.² At first glance, bioregion-based education and global education appear to be incompatible or even incommensurable. After all, global education aims at fostering an awareness of our living “in a cocoon of culture whose circumference equals the circumference of the globe,” as suggested by Lee Anderson.³ In contrast, bioregion-based education stresses the need to preserve local ecological systems and to establish the bond between members of a local community and their “place.”

However, it should be noted that both “the global” and “the local” are conceptual constructs. In reality, there is no irrefutable demarcation between the global and the local. Moreover, while the globalization of the political economy seems to form a global monoculture, the emergence of postmodernism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and politics of identities clearly indicates the continuous diversification of human cultures. As Edward W. Soja notes that “all that was local becomes increasingly globalized, all that is global becomes increasingly localized,” the bifurcation of the global and the local appears to be problematic.⁴ Can global education seek to raise an awareness of global cultural unity without exploring diverse local cultures, especially the culture(s) of one’s own local community? Can bioregion-based education exclusively focus on preserving one’s local bioregion without addressing global environmental protection, world peace, and universal human rights?

In response to the above questions, I first explore the complicated interplay of local and global environmental concerns. I point out that as culture plays a significant role in shaping bioregional boundaries, bioregion-based education cannot cultivate a meaningful bioregional sensibility without addressing political and economic globalization. Next, I examine both the substantive and perceptual dimensions of global education. I argue that the acquisition of substantive knowledge about global interconnections is instrumental to addressing one’s bioregional concerns; moreover, the perceptual dimension of global education emphasizes the cultivation of open-mindedness and multicultural awareness, which correspond with bioregionalists’ efforts to regenerate biodiversity.

NATURE AND CULTURE IN THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

Popular slogans such as “think globally, act locally,” “local struggles with global support,” and “local problems with global solutions” denote the intricate

relationship between the local and the global. To a large extent, we are living in a global village. However, localities do not thereby evaporate in the process of globalization. After Sony purchased Columbia Pictures in 1989, Akio Morita made the following interesting remarks: "I do not like the word 'multinational.' I don't know what it means. I created a new term: 'global localization.' That's our new slogan."⁵ While the slogan "global localization" cannot disguise transnational corporations' endeavors to globalize their market, it still reveals a recognition of various local cultures which continue to thrive and flourish despite the imperative forces of economic globalization.

The dialectic interplay between the global and the local is especially evident in worldwide environmental movements. On the one hand, because the impact of today's ecological problems such as greenhouse effects cannot be enclosed within a particular region or nation, phrases such as "one earth, one family" have permeated mass media. On the other hand, there is no solid and well-established international environmental coalition. In fact, we continue to see evidence of the tension between developed and developing countries, a not-in-my-back-yard mentality, and environmental racism. Instead of promoting a global environmental coalition, the emergence of bioregionalism questions and confronts the continuous globalization of the political economy.

Bioregionalism is a complicated and contested concept. It could mean different things to different people. Doug Aberley points out that as bioregionalists are committed to decentralism, they are unlikely to form a central committee in order to offer a univocal definition of bioregionalism. Also, bioregionalists are more concerned about reflecting on "the needs and values of living-in-place" than crafting "a seamless theoretical construction or utopian diatribe."⁶ Clearly, bioregionalism is neither a monolithic school of thought nor a unified environmental movement. Above all, bioregionalists' discourse on the concepts of nature and culture tend to be incoherent, ambivalent, and irresolute. Yet, their divergent perspectives regarding the relations between nature and culture shed significant light on the dialectic interplay between the global and the local.

Gary Synder, a contemporary bioregionalist, advocates for "cultural and individual pluralism, unified by a type of world trial council...[and] division by natural and cultural boundaries rather than arbitrary political boundaries."⁷ Seemingly, Synder recognizes the interconnections between nature and culture. To him, modern science, technology, and nation/state did not develop in a social vacuum; rather, there are certain cultural values which facilitate and sustain the construction of modern science, technology, nation/state. At the same time, he appears to regard nature as a normative concept which we need to abide by in order to form an ecologically congenial culture. In Synder's own words, what bioregionalists envision is "a planet on which the human population lives harmoniously and dynamically by employing a sophisticated and unobtrusive technology in a world environment which is 'left nature.'"⁸

Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann further promote the idea of "living-in-place," which means "following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are

uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long term occupancy of the site.”⁹As modern science and technology have disrupted place, Berg and Dasmann encourage us to participate in *reinhabitation* by “becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it.”¹⁰ Similarly, Berg also proposes “a bioregional model” that can identify “balance points in our interactions with natural systems, and figures of regulation that can operate to direct or limit activities to achieve balance.”¹¹ Berg’s bioregional model parallels David Haenke’s belief in the existence of ecological laws, which we ought to observe in order to establish bioregion-based societies.¹² Similarly, Kirkpatrick Sale in his influential book, *Dwellers in the Land*, promotes an economics of self-sufficiency within one’s “natural regions.”¹³

Despite the global impacts of modern science and technology, bioregionalists appear to be most concerned about nature as it exists in their own “region” or “home place.” In *Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry claims that “The Earth presents itself to us not as a uniform global reality but as a complex of highly differentiated regions caught up in the comprehensive unity of the planet itself.”¹⁴ In effect, many bioregionalists have made concerted efforts to identify the boundaries of these presumably distinguishable and yet interconnected regions.¹⁵ On the one hand, some bioregionalists believe in the existence of “natural” rather than artificial boundaries. For instance, Gene Marshall states that “my local bioregion is a collection of communities within some meaningful boundaries determined by the factors of basic land topography, watersheds, flora and fauna, habitats, altitudes, rainfalls, temperatures, and other such factors.”¹⁶ On the other hand, some bioregionalists are inclined to take human culture into consideration as they endeavor to map out the bioregional boundaries. For example, David McCloskey claims that “ecoregional boundaries are *natural wholistic emergents*,” which can be identified by looking “to the special ways in which the face of land, tectonic forces below, weather patterns above, the flow of waters, flora and fauna, *native peoples*, and *cultural identities* coverage and reinforce one another.”¹⁷

As discussed above, bioregionalists seem to share a common belief that cultural norms should reflect the natural norms that are inherent within one’s biotic community, not vice versa. To many bioregionalists, modern science and technology are nurtured and sustained by ecologically incongenial cultural values. Moreover, they point out that most historic and contemporary political boundaries do not correspond with the natural ecological boundaries. Above all, the formation of today’s urban cities appear to infringe or even contravene bioregional boundaries.¹⁸ Urbanization also has contributed to the dislocation of “native” people and the erosion of “indigenous” place-based knowledge. Migrants’ uprootedness and diasporas reflect the fragmented bioregions.¹⁹ To the bioregionalists, as the political boundaries deviate from natural boundaries, they often only serve the purpose of meeting the needs of political and economic elites.²⁰ Thus, bioregionalists advocate for the devolution of power to “native people” in a given bioregion in order to preserve the human culture that is consonant with “the ecological law” or “the bioregional model.” It is clear that bioregionalists are committed to promoting cultural adjustment to natural bioregions. However, it is untenable to verify the

existence of pristine bioregions because of constant and continuous reciprocal interactions between nature and culture.²¹ As bioregionalists endeavor to reconstruct ecologically incongenial culture, they indeed stress human agency in mapping and re-mapping bioregional boundaries. In other words, the presumably self-evident bioregional boundaries actually are subject to human reasoning and interpretation.

Sale claims that “the borders between such areas (bioregions) are usually not rigid — nature works of course with flexibility and fluidity — but the general contours of the regions themselves are not hard to identify by using a little ecological knowledge.”²² Most bioregionalists highly value ecological knowledge that is grounded in indigenous cultural traditions fostering a recognition of the interdependence between nature and human culture. McCloskey states that the bioregional movement aims at cultivating a “grounded, authentic, local knowledge rather than abstractions, diversity and decentralization rather than standardization and centralization.”²³ Nevertheless, the mapping of bioregional boundaries and bioregional planning derive from the science of ecology and have become highly technical at both theoretical and practical levels. Wolfgang Sachs notes that “Ecology is both computer modelling and political action, scientific discipline as well as all-embracing worldview....[The] science of ecology gives rise to a scientific anti-modernism which has succeeded largely in disrupting the dominant discourse, yet the science of ecology opens the way for the technocratic recuperation of protest.”²⁴

In fact, bioregional assessment grounded in the science of ecology has emerged as an indispensable measure for managing and restoring ecosystem. Maragret Herring states that “bioregional assessments integrate a broad range of information about the social, economic, and ecological conditions within a region in order to provide a basis for making decisions and taking action. They are bioregional, which is to say they are ecosystem-based, delineated by natural processes and elements rather than by planning units and political jurisdiction.”²⁵ Yet, professionals trained in bioregional assessment have become aware of “the mismatch between the desire for political certainty and the inherent uncertainty of natural systems.”²⁶ In fact, bioregional assessment and the ensuing bioregional planning are determined mainly by a political process even though the delineation of a bioregion might be a natural process. To illustrate, bioregional assessment and planning are committed to facilitating one’s reinhabitation in one’s home place. Reinhabitation requires concerted efforts to become “native” in one’s bioregion by acquiring ecological knowledge about one’s biotic community. However, to many of the dislocated people in urban areas, the acquisition of political and economic knowledge outweigh ecological knowledge. Instead of inquiring into the local land topography, watersheds, flora and fauna habits, various grass-roots environmental organizations have shown greater concerns for the political systems and processes that sanction irresponsible toxic waste disposal in working-class, low-income, and predominantly minority communities.²⁷

The “natives” in the so called “Third-World” nations are keenly aware that the destruction of their home places is mainly due to colonization and the globalization of the political economy. While it is essential to re-value and re-learn their indigenous ecological knowledge, a better understanding of the political and

economic dimensions of the global/local assemblage appears to be a more urgent issue. Vandana Shiva and Radha Holla-Bhar offer an insightful analysis of multinational corporations' privatizing the developing nations' natural resources. In India, neem trees have been used as medicine, toiletries, contraception, timber, fuel, and agricultural aids for centuries. As multinational chemical and pharmaceutical corporations "discovered" the benefits of neem trees, they patented various forms of neem extract for endless pursuit of profit. In this increasingly globalized commercial society, indigenous Indians realize that "the unfortunate logic of patenting is that if you cannot beat patentees, you may have to join them."²⁸ Thus, the new alliance of farmers and scientists in India must promote the collective patent (collective intellectual property rights).²⁹

This case indicates that place-based knowledge can be globalized for private interests or collective interests, depending upon the value systems. Yet, the imbalanced power relationship between the developed and the developing nations has sustained the current political and economic systems that in turn shape the formation of global monoculture, transforming, as Leslie Sklair indicates "all public mass media and their contents into opportunities to sell ideas, values, products, in short, a consumer world view."³⁰ Thus Shiva elaborates:

the 'global' in the dominant discourse is the political space in which a particular dominant local seeks global control, and frees itself of local, national and international restraints. The global does not represent the universal human interest, it represents a particular local and parochial interest which has been globalized through the scope of its reach...[The] "global" must accede to the local, since the local exists with nature, while the "global" exists only in the offices of World Bank/IMF and headquarters of multinational corporations. *The local is everywhere. The real ecological space of global ecology is to be found in the integration of all locals.* The "global" in global reach is a political, not an ecological space.³¹

Clearly, the local is a "site both of promise and predicament," as suggested by Arif Dirlik.³² In response to globalization of the political economy, a nostalgic attempt to preserve or to restore the simplistic and intact past can easily result in futile efforts.³³ Thus, Dirlik further argues that it is essential to keep the boundaries of the local open.³⁴ In other words, the local is always situated in the global context. At the same time, interlocking localities shape and form the global. As socially responsive educational reforms, both global education and bioregion based education represent a collective educational endeavor to develop critical, interpretative, and normative perspectives concerning the dynamic global/local assemblage. In the following section, I will explore the confluence of these two educational reform movements.

BIOREGION-BASED EDUCATION AND GLOBAL EDUCATION:

AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE

As ongoing globalization affects almost every aspects of our existence, more and more concerned educators are committed to promoting global education in order to address varied issues related to the causes and consequences of globalization. Although global education has gained considerable currency at the global level, confusion about the theory and practices of global education still permeates the educational community. Roland Case argues that there are two dimensions of global education: the substantive and the perceptual. According to Case, the substantive dimension focuses on the acquisition of knowledge regarding global systems,

international events, world cultures, and global geography, while the perceptual dimension emphasizes the cultivation of open-mindedness, resistance to stereotyping, non-chauvinism, empathy, and so on.³⁵ These two dimensions are complementary to each other. Case points out that “the perceptual dimension is the lens for the substantive dimension.”³⁶ Distinguished from a parochial world-view, the perceptual global perspective can be conducive to a more inclusive moral effort to promote world peace, global environmental protection, and universal human rights.³⁷ However, without sufficient substantive knowledge about global interdependence, one is unlikely to carry out such an inclusive moral commitment. Conversely, the acquisition of substantive knowledge about global interconnections alone can be instrumental to ensuring one’s individualistic or nationalistic interests. In other words, an awareness of global interdependence does not necessarily promise a moral commitment to the pursuit of global justice. After all, it has been widely recognized that an interdependent relationship does exist between developed and developing nations. Without challenging the hegemonic status of developed nations, the attempt to “globalize” all the interrelated social problems can easily result in repeating imperialist intervention in developing nations.³⁸

Continuing, Kai Nilsen argues that “justice is only possible...where there are common bonds of reciprocity.”³⁹ The common bonds of reciprocity derive from a commitment to ensure an equal interplay between cultures. The world-wide hegemony of developed nations precludes reciprocal interactions between people of developing and developed nations and erodes cultural pluralism in the global community. Thus, it is indispensable to incorporate development issues into global education. Above all, development should not be viewed as an exclusively Third World issue. Nor should the Third World be treated as an “object” to be studied by people in developed nations. More specifically, proponents of global education have become more aware of the need to demystify the pursuit of growth-oriented development and envision alternative development. The term “development” mainly refers to a process of modernization and industrialization leading to economic growth. To a large extent, development is viewed as intrinsically good and morally worthy. However, most so-called “developing” and “underdeveloped” nations were previously colonized by today’s developed nations in the west. In the post-colonial era, the developed nations’ efforts to facilitate “development” in developing nations often continue to be based on political domination, military intervention, and economic manipulation. In other words, growth-oriented development has become a conceptual vehicle which allows the developed nations to maintain worldwide hegemony and affluence in terms of capital accumulations. In the meantime, it also sustains poverty and contributes to the worsening of ecological problems in the Third World countries. Gradually, there has been an increasing awareness that development in terms of economic productivity cannot be viewed as intrinsically good and morally worthy.

Critical and comparative inquiry into the constitutive values of growth-oriented development and indigenous cultural values represent a counter-hegemonic effort to re-orient ecologically exploitative cultural practices.⁴⁰ A re-evaluation of different indigenous cultural traditions should not be viewed as simply a reactionary

movement. Rather, it could shed significant light on understanding the ideological roots of the global pursuit of development and the delineation of alternative conceptions of development. For instance, in his attempt to offer an alternative conception of development, Phrasa Rajavaramuni points out that the word “development” in Thai is “phatthana” or “charoen.” Neither refers to material growth in quantity. Instead, the Thai conception of “development” can mean reduction or elimination of unnecessary things in a certain context.⁴¹ From this perspective, the pursuit of development must embrace a moral obligation to curb our endless desire for material production and consumption.

In line with the appeal to indigenous cultural traditions, there has been continuous support for the nation-state’s sovereignty in determining developmental and environmental policies. However, it should be noted that the sovereign rights of many nations resides in centralized, bureaucratic, and authoritarian governments. Such political systems have been supportive to the transnational corporations that have not shown any concern for equal distribution of wealth within a nation or across national boundaries, not to mention their notoriety for inducing ecological deterioration.⁴² Moreover, most governments play a reactive role in the contemporary environmental movement. It is grass-root environmental groups that urge the governments to enact and reinforce environmental policies. Thus, proponents of alternative development stress that participatory democracy is the key to ensure the public’s involvement in the formulation of environmental policies.⁴³ Specifically, they promote local control of local resources and strive for exerting political power to veto developmental projects imposed by centralized state governments and international developmental enterprises.

To sum up, the growth-oriented pursuit of development tends to reinforce rather than resolve the economic and political disparity between the developing and developed nations. To rectify global injustice, proponents of alternative development, like bioregionalists, strive for the affirmation of indigenous cultural values and the establishment of participatory democracy.

It is noted that, on the one hand, the homogenization of modern education systems tends to legitimize and sustain the world-wide pursuit of development.⁴⁴ On the other hand, both global education and bioregion based education are essential educational reforms that embrace a critical inquiry into the monolithic vision of development and the alternative visions of development. More specifically, the substantive dimension of global education is conducive to raising our awareness of diversified perspectives, frames of reference, and values in the global community. Raising our multicultural awareness also entails a recognition that cultural formation is a dynamic and interactive process, and cultural differences are “the product of human work.”⁴⁵ It follows that the globalization of the political economy is neither predetermined nor unquestionable. As the perceptual dimension of global education is grounded in a moral commitment to global justice and universal human rights, global education indeed endorses the effort to reclaim and revalue various indigenous cultural traditions and place-based knowledge, as supported by bioregionalists’ and proponents of alternative development.

In line with Cicero and Hierocles, Martha C. Nussbaum suggests that one can become a citizen of the world without giving up local affiliations. Specifically, one needs to recognize that one is always surrounded by “a series of concentric circles,” namely the self, the immediate family, the extended family, the local community, the nation, and the world.⁴⁶ Teaching about place, the core of bioregion-based education, enables one to gain a better understanding of such “a series of concentric circles.” Ivan Illich notes that modern educational systems in both developed and developing nations are inclined to guide individuals “away from their natural environment and pass [them] through a social womb in which they are formed sufficiently to fit into everyday life.”⁴⁷ As the predominant modern education system severs the organic connections between humans and nature, modern schooling also opts to sustain rather than reconstruct the homogenized political and economic systems. Bioregion-based education represents a deliberate effort to revive “the organic connections” between humans and nature. The cultivation of “a sense of place” could further enable us to reclaim human agency through participatory re-evaluation of indigenous cultural values, inquiry into place-based knowledge, and establishment of community at both local and global levels.

In conclusion, place-based knowledge by no means is circumscribed by parochialism. Likewise, global education need not spurn bioregionalism. In fact, by re-balancing modern culture with the biosphere, bioregion-based education can become the key to raising our awareness of global interconnections. The confluence of global education and bioregion-based education clearly suggests the possibility of developing a “global” perspective which is sensitive to the interrelatedness of today’s ecological problems and to the particular needs of local communities.

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