

THE BEGINNING OF JUSTICE: ENDING GLOBAL EDUCATION AND THE ASSUMPTION OF SCARCITY

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Steven Mather's paper invites us to consider the contemporary challenge of moral/environmental education from a widely ignored window. I cannot but affirm his moral motivation to eliminate both human marginalization and environmental degradation, as well as his educational aim to help bring about fundamental and all encompassing changes in the way that the First World and the ruling classes of the developing world live. For this style of life, Mather rightly suggests, is neither socially just nor ecologically sustainable.

My paper, however, uses an alternative window to examine that same challenge. Among constructive postmodern thinkers and the world's social majorities struggling for social justice and ecological sustainability, there is an emerging recognition that we need, not globalization, but localization: the recovery and regeneration of our commons. Following these insights, my paper sketches the ideas of some postmodern thinkers who challenge us to go beyond global education and the assumption of scarcity — to reestablish local education, replacing uprooted global citizenship with rooted dwelling.

BEYOND GLOBAL EDUCATION

Globalisms are neither a desirable nor an unavoidable prospect. Contemporary globalisms are slogans and campaigns that simply exacerbate the diseases they pretend to cure. "Properly speaking global thinking is not possible. Those who have thought globally," cautions Wendell Berry, "have done so by means of simplifications too extreme and oppressive to merit the name of thought."¹ Resisting all varieties of globalisms, which include global education and environmentalism, Berry challenges the motto: "Think globally, act locally." He clarifies why the global thinking promoted by most contemporary liberation and peace movements is not just "futile," but in fact "impossible" and dangerous: "You can't think about what you don't know, and nobody knows this planet.... The people who think globally do so abstractly and statistically, by reducing the globe to quantities."²

Berry's insights are more than amply borne out in global fora like the Earth Summit, a "theatre on the Titanic"³ in which nations fought for their rights to exploit and pollute the earth. His caution also seems pertinent as one considers Mather's daunting global plans: for example, to keep human rights compatible with global resources like oxygen producing rain forests, and to teach people to go against their "natural" tendency, which is "to value their closer community relations over those of the global human totality."

Forsaking the arrogance (of Super Powers and others) to "Think Big," "think globally," Berry humbly invites us to "think little" — on the human scale; the scale of our local communities. The right local questions will be the right global ones. "You can't do a good act that is global," he clarifies. "A good act has to be scaled and designed so that it fits harmoniously into the natural conditions and given of a particular place." Local knowledge, local skills and local love give substance and feasibility to socially just and ecologically preserving acts. "If we want to keep our

thoughts and acts from destroying the globe, then we must see to it that we do not ask too much of the globe or any part of it. To make sure that we do not ask too much, we must learn to live at home, as independently and self-sufficiently as we can,” concludes Berry.⁴

BEYOND THE ASSUMPTION OF SCARCITY

“Scarcity” connotes shortage, rarity, restriction, want, insufficiency, even frugality. But “the law of scarcity” formulated by economists and now permeating textbooks as well as the perception of modern people all over the world does not allude directly to those common situations connoted by the word. The “law of scarcity” has been construed by economists to denote the technical assumption that human wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas our means are limited though improvable. The assumption implies choices over the allocation of means (resources). This “fact” defines the “economic problem” *par excellence*, whose “solution” is proposed by economists through the market or the plan.

Far from being a universal “natural law” for every society and culture, the creation of scarcity — in the technical meaning of the word — defines the essence of a colonial project for the universal establishing of economic value. It requires the devaluing of all other forms of social existence. And such a project is associated with a specific culture and a given period of history. Historically, observes Ivan Illich, the “regime of scarcity” was introduced through the proliferation of money as a scarce means of exchange. And scarcity, he adds, defines the field in which the laws of economics relate “(1) *subjects* (possessive, invidious, genderless individuals — personal or corporate), (2) institutions which foster mimesis, (3) *commodities*, within (4) an environment in which the commons have been transformed into *resources*, private or public.”⁵

Illich, Sahlins, Polanyi and others have given detailed analyses of cultures in which non-economic assumptions govern lives and which reject the assumption of scarcity whenever it appears among them.⁶ And since the “law of scarcity” and economics have a beginning, they may have an end. Their end is urged by postmodern thinkers who have observed the destruction of culture and commons by the invasion of the economy as the organizing principle of society. “Unless the distinction between scarce productive resources and shared, porous commons is philosophically and legally recognized, the coming *steady state society* will be an oligarchic, undemocratic, and authoritarian expertocracy governed by ecologists,” predicts Illich.⁷

Because he recognizes that both nature and culture are commons, *not* resources, Gandhi staunchly directs education, economics and politics towards the ideals of community independence and self-sufficiency. For Gandhi, resource scarcity is not a problem. There is enough, he maintains, for everyone’s needs, but not for any one’s greed. Deconstructing the modern reality of *homo oeconomicus*, the “progress” and “development” glorified by the economic systems of modern superpowers, Gandhi urges his people to resist the ecological and social violence of the latter: Gandhi writes: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the west...keeping the world in chains. If [our nation] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”⁸

Gandhi observes how modern greed (*pleonexia*, for MacIntyre) is legitimized and morally dignified within contemporary economic, political and ethical systems, whether capitalist, communist, or socialist. One sacred protective umbrella is offered by the modern declaration of universal “human rights,” including the rights to modern jobs and education. Deconstructing this right, among others, Gandhi urges the so called “underdeveloped” to resist the temptations of the modern educational system. For its red shiny apple of equal opportunities into the occupational culture of *homo oeconomicus*/the national economy is rotten to the core.

The educational challenge, for Gandhi, lies neither in more efficient global eco or human rights management. Instead, Gandhi delineates civic and moral education for local subsistence and

regional self-sufficiency. His basic formula for social justice: live simply so that others can simply live. In applying this formula, Gandhi helps learners delink from the modern industrial economy by strengthening their roots in communities which care for and husband their local soils. Such roots, Gandhi predicts, will regenerate the earth's ecology, ravaged by progress and civilization. And they will keep alive the multiplicity of non-modern cultures — threatened to extinction by the globally metastasizing monoculture of modernity.

LOCAL EDUCATION: FROM UPROOTED GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP TO ROOTED DWELLING

Revisionist postmodern thinkers are beginning to recognize the importance of communal roots for initiating learners into the ethics of social justice and ecological sustainability. Writing on the forefront of revisionist postmodernism, David Orr educates for knowledge and skills that transform modern rootless “residents” into rooted “dwellers” of just, sustainable, postmodern communities. For we, the residents of the global village, the successful graduates of our “nice” campuses, are “educated” to master the knowledge and skills needed to supply ourselves with consumables from “places around the world that are largely unknown to us, as are those to which we consign our toxic and radioactive wastes, garbage, sewage, and industrial trash.” Observing the ecological illiteracy of modern “global citizens,” Orr maintains that the “sum total of violence wrought by people who do not know who they are because they do not know where they are is the global environmental crisis.”⁹

To heal the modern rape of nature by people “educated” to be global citizens, Orr seeks to regenerate the knowledge and skills that define authentic “dwellers of the land”: living increasingly on resources “within the horizon,” and living on the scale of David to achieve autonomy from the modern Goliaths — our gargantuan, opaque, resource guzzling, polluting institutions and technologies. Delineating the first of many concrete steps in the theory and praxis of dwelling, Orr’s curricula and pedagogy bring together the college community in a critical study of all that they consume and waste. Orr starts with the most basic of human rights: the right to food. Instead of defending this right in the abstract, he shows how each community can educate itself to apply ethical/ecological principles in studying how their food is produced, transported, and distributed. Orr’s education does not divorce the basic human right to eat from the basic moral responsibility to consume food which is grown in socially/ecologically responsible ways: by community farmers who enrich local culture and communal soil, by reducing their dependency on fossil fuels, chemicals, and other socially/ecologically destructive industrial inputs.

Along these lines, Orr’s civic education/ecological literacy reforms every aspect of our unsustainable campus life. Instead of focusing on human rights in the abstract, Orr searches for their concretization in the context of sustainable communities. Orr follows Berry, Gandhi, and others in reviving the lost communal virtues: of rooted care; of responsible belonging; of temperance, enoughness, and frugality governing our pursuit of freedom and other fundamental human rights.

CONCLUSION

Humble and humbling are the educational recommendations by Gandhi, Berry, Orr among others, that I have briefly sketched as alternatives to Mather’s global proposals. Rather than groping for global overreach, these ground people in their neighborhoods and eco-communities, regenerating the dying land and communitarian ethics that Mather makes reference to. In and through such regeneration alone can we find local solutions to the global problem. With our feet planted on our own communal soils, we might put back into the bottle the modern genie of global destruction, scarcity and human marginalization. Surely we reduce this genie’s abusive powers by weaning ourselves from our destructive dependency on unknown places and by our oppression of unnamed people to fulfill our so-called “needs,” our sacred modern “rights.”¹⁰

¹ Wendell Berry, "Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse," *The Atlantic Monthly* (February, 1991), 61. Also see Wendell Berry, "Think Little," *A Continuous Harmony* (New York: HBJ Publishers, 1972).

² Wendell Berry, "Nobody Loves This Planet," *In Context*, no. 27 (Winter 1991).

³ Wolfgang Sachs, "The Theatre on the Titanic," presented at the Conference on Ecology and Development, Intercultural Institute of Montreal, Spring 1992. On this issue, also see Vandana Shiva, "The Greening of Global Reach," *The Ecologist* 22, no. 6 (November/December, 1992), and Edward Goldsmith, Nicholas Hildyard, et al, "Whose Common Future," *The Ecologist* 22, no. 4 (July/August, 1992).

⁴ Berry, "Out of Your Car," 62.

⁵ Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 19.

⁶ Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972). On the emergence of *homo oeconomicus*, also see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975). Polanyi documents the economic history of Europe in terms of the creation of the economy as an autonomous sphere, disjointed from the rest of society. He shows that the national market did not appear as the gradual and spontaneous emancipation of the economic sphere from governmental control, but quite the opposite: as a conscious and often violent intervention by the government. And Louis Dumont, among others, has shown that the discovery of the economy through the invention of economics was, in fact, a process of the social construction of ideas and concepts. See his *From Mandeville to Marx: the Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

⁷ Illich, *Gender*, 19.

⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *Young India* (December 20, 1988), 422. Also see Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj Or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad, India: The Navjivan Trust, 1989) and *Towards New Education* (Ahmedabad, India: the Navjivan Trust, 1989).

⁹ David Orr, *Ecological Literacy—Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 102.

¹⁰ For one of the most incisive deconstructions of modern needs and human rights like education, see Ivan Illich, *Toward a History of Needs* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1988).

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