

Bioregionalism as a Middle Way between Anarchy and Collusion

by Gene Marshall

First let me define the terms I am using.

By “collusion” I mean collusion with the existing patterns of industrial civilization. In particular I am talking about collusion with the rulership of the transnational corporations over our lives and over our national democracies. All of us collude in the sense that we are all immersed in an unavoidable participation in current human society and all of its ills. But the “collusion” I am attempting to identify here is consent to and support of the expanding rulership of the transnational corporations.

By “anarchy” I mean a rejection of all governing authority. Anarchist thinking is being misunderstood by both its critics and its supporters. The social critique present in much anarchist thinking has merit that its opponents overlook. At the other extreme, supporters of anarchist thinking do not always notice that there is a big difference between a full affirmation of human freedom and the delusion that human society ever did or ever can function without governmental enforcements, police, and armed services.

Anarchy

I am going to discuss anarchy first. The May-June 2001 edition of the Utne Reader devoted seven pages to a discussion of anarchist thinking. Three of those pages were an interview with John Zerzan, whose ideas have been influential with many of those participating in the anti-globalization protests which began when the World Trade Organization met in Seattle.

In this interview, Zerzan makes clear that his brand of anarchist thinking is rooted in a critique of civilization and a return to tribal life. Here are some of his words: “There has been a potent revolution in the fields of anthropology and archaeology over the past 20 years, and increasingly people are coming to understand that life before agriculture and domestication--in which by domesticating others we domesticated ourselves--was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health.” I agree with Zerzan to this extent: the hierarchical and oppressive patterns of civilization did not exist in precivilization tribal societies, and we need to envision a future in which these patterns no longer characterize human society.

But Zerzan idealizes precivilization societies. To begin with, precivilization tribal society did not contain the scientific anthropology and archaeology which Zerzan relishes. As he himself says, precivilization tribal life had no well-developed sense of time or history. He counts this as a virtue, but he does not admit the extent to which he himself is enmeshed in historical sensibilities. Historical sensibilities are part of what has been given to us in the period of civilizations. Civilizations gave us our planet-wide perspectives on life and reality. Civilizations also gave us our sense of being part of a vast, cosmic, developmental drama--humanity being the aware portion of a cosmos that has been somewhere different and is going somewhere new. Historical sensibility opens our experience of nature to something wider than familiar stuff going round and round. Precivilization tribal life did indeed have virtues such as intimacy with nature and a classless respect for all its members, but precivilization tribal societies were also extremely parochial, each society possessing a very narrow cultural canopy which reluctantly and very

slowly opened itself to new information. Zerzan would not actually consent to live or even be able to live in such a society. This is a delusive and confusing way to attempt to envision a viable future.

It is true that a viable future society does not have to include the oppressive patterns of classical and industrial civilizations. A viable future society can include intimacy with nature and a classless respect for all its members. But a full commitment to tribal antiquity is a fool's gold, a mirage that confuses the mind and creates disrespect for the most creative and relevant innovators in contemporary life.

Our problem is not modern technology, but technological innovation for the sake of profit and in utter disregard for the general good. Our problem is not huge pools of economic capital, but economic capital that is unaccountable to the will of an ecologically sensitive human population. Our problem is not governmental regulation and enforcements, but governments controlled by an elite minority of wealthy individuals. Our problem is not the police or the armed services, but police and armed services who are obedient to an inadequate context.

To put this pointedly, the role of a policeperson or a soldier is just as noble and compassionate as that of nurse or teacher. Educators can certainly be destroyers of the earth as well as the police or the military. Lawyers, doctors, merchants, artisans, farmers, ditch diggers, all these occupations are wholesome or destructive depending on the context in which they are carried out.

It is illusory to think that precivilization society was, or any future society can be, without police and military enforcements--without what the U.S. constitution verbalized as "domestic tranquility" and the "common defense." Precivilization societies had rules, customs, and taboos which were enforced with more than verbal persuasion. In tribal societies, exile from the community and death were enforcements that played their usual bottom-line role.

Envisioning an ecological, just, and viable future need not abolish governmental enforcement. Rather, we can envision a different quality of governmental enforcement--one that enforces laws that reflect the ever-evolving consensus of the human citizens involved. And those citizens, in order to make good decisions, need the whole truth to work with: the full extent of the ecological crisis, the most promising strategies and technologies, the most workable human arrangements, the most effective decision-making processes. The problem is not human nature, but human beings operating without the truth.

The deepest irony within this entire discussion about anarchy is that we already have a form of anarchy--the anarchy of the transnational corporations--institutions free to do almost anything they please with little or no accountability. Apparently, what these institutions please to do is to make money and to do so in almost complete disregard for every other value, including the devastation of the natural planet.

The solution to our social ills is not anarchy; corporation anarchy is perhaps the most important overriding problem we have to solve.

Collusion with Hierarchical Civilization

Yet the radical anarchists' thoroughgoing critique of civilization contains part of the truth. We cannot and must not try to move on to a better form of hierarchical civilization. For a long time we have used the term "civilization" to mean good society. We can begin using that term to mean a particular mode of human society that has predominated in the last 60 centuries.

Tribal antiquity is a powerful witness that another edition of civilization is not necessary for human survival. Humanity lived a thousand centuries without civilization and might well live another thousand centuries without civilization. Furthermore, it is clear that our current hierarchical, industrial civilization is not sustainable upon this planet for even one more century.

In the whole of human history, we have known only two basic modes of society, the tribal and civilization. It is understandable that people tend to believe one or the other of these two propositions: (1) that a better form of hierarchical civilization is the only option to a return to tribal life, or (2) that a return to tribal life is the only option to hierarchical civilization. Indeed, if our viable future is neither tribal life nor civilization, what is it?

This is the challenging question: what does it mean to move beyond civilization without moving back to tribal modes of society? Surely we can and need to abandon civilization in all the following respects: We can replace all-out use of the Earth with ecological sanity. We can replace all-out warfare with negotiation and responsible restraint. We can replace hierarchical rule by a wealthy elite with full democracy. We can replace male rule with male-female balance. We can replace widening inequity with flexible equity. We can replace arrogant uniformities with the honoring of diversity. All these are steps away from what being "civilized" has always entailed. All these shifts are also steps toward a mode of human society that has never existed before. We need not call this new mode of society a better form of "civilization." And we need not call this new mode of society a better form of "tribalism." We can begin retooling our minds to realize that we have been moving toward an entirely new mode of human society for several centuries.

The eighteenth century democratic revolution was a first step toward dismantling the social mode called "civilization." Until that time the ethical battles within civilizations might be characterized as struggles between the good king and the corrupt king. The good king or queen was responsive to the care of his or her people. The corrupt king served only a wealthy elite or perhaps only a personal delusion of everlasting grandeur. Full democracy is a society with no king or queen at all. Actually, current presidents and prime ministers are still quasi-kings and queens. While their term is temporary and their power is limited by a wider swath of values, current democracies have not escaped from the pattern of having our primary leaders chosen by a wealthy elite to be their king. Industrial civilization has done away with the landed aristocracy but replaced it with a moneyed aristocracy that is far more powerful and far more insulated from the values of the land and of land-living people. Perhaps there were good kings in the middle ages that were far more democratic than current presidents who have been selected by and are obedient to the power of the moneyed aristocracy.

This is the key point: full democracy means the end of the social mode we have called "civilization." It means the end of big-money rule. It means the end of aristocracy and the end of powerless peasants. It means dignity and power for each and every human being. In this sense, full democracy is a return to tribal life. But since there cannot be a return to tribal life in any complete sense, a viable democracy must be a fresh invention. Our entire vision of a next mode of human society must be a fresh invention. Any vision which sees no further than a moderated civilization is in collusion with our current hierarchical tyranny over nature and over most of humanity.

This collusion with the tyranny of industrial civilization does not characterize only the political right. The political left can be described as favoring the moderation of the tyranny of civilization. Labor unions, for example, moderate corporate power and thereby moderate injustice toward working people. The vision of a typical labor union is not the end of civilization nor even the end of corporations. Labor unions are part of corporate practice and they are

dependent upon corporate practice as well as a moderation of it. When corporations pass from the stage of history, labor unions pass away as well. Life beyond the corporation will mean the creation of economic institutions in which owners, managers, and workers are all the same group of people.

The entire round of liberal politics is for the time being an important moderation of the evils of civilization, but for the long haul liberal politics cannot provide a solution to the ecological and human-justice crises that are increasing every year because of the expanding powers of civilization. The question is not, "How can civilization be saved?" The question is, "How will civilization end?" The overriding alternatives are: (1) will humanity end civilization by creating a viable replacement? or (2) will the Earth end civilization through its inability to support this obsolete mode of human living? The political left, right, and center are all forms of collusion with saving civilization, a hopeless and self-destructive objective.

Bioregionalism as a Middle Way

Bioregionalism is not an ideology. It is neither right nor left nor center. It is neither anarchist nor establishmentarian. Bioregionalism is a basic attitude toward reality--toward the sheer mystery in a teaspoon of dirt. Bioregionalism is a breakthrough of wisdom, a realization that all the present and future scientific knowledge of the human race will never understand what is going on in one cubic centimeter of living soil. Bioregionalism is a deep belly laugh toward any and all human pretensions to understand and control this boundlessly complex living planet. The very idea that this planet can be a human spaceship, that we can guide it, manage it, drive it, reproduce it, or even basically improve upon it is ludicrous.

Bioregionalism is a human attitude toward the more-than-human natural world of which we humans are one living part. Bioregionalism is a reconciliation with the sheer mystery streaming through our wild nature. We humans neither understand our own humanity nor the larger whole of which our humanity is a fragment. Bioregionalism is an attitude of humility toward ourselves and our planetary home. Bioregionalism is a commitment to be intimate with our own natural lives and with the natural whole of which we are one small part.

Bioregionalism is a clarification about the actuality that we are Earthlings rather than disembodied rational minds trapped in a temporary Earth-suit. We are part, a significant part, of an amazing natural whole. We are that part of the Earth which is aware of the Earth's unfathomable mysteriousness and incredible possibilities.

Bioregionalism is also the awareness that our actual local homes are not our zip-code districts or states or provinces or nations or any other arbitrary human-made district. Our local homes are part of the planet, a region of the planet determined by the planet itself, not by narrow human purpose. Human life, being part of the planet, enters into determining the boundaries of our home regions; but we also have to ask the dirt and the trees, the plants and animals and microbes, the sky and the ground what our home region actually is.

It is true that a "local home bioregion" means a home for humans. A bioregion for ants would be much smaller. A local bioregion for humans needs to be large enough for the necessities of human life to be provided by that region. In a bioregionally ordered planet there would surely be a sharing of material products and cultural wisdom among the bioregions of the planet; nevertheless, each region would be happier if it raised its own food, made its own clothing, and built its own housing with local building materials. Our current inter-global economic dependence for non-luxury items almost never serves local people or local environments; it almost always serves best and perhaps only the global profit-makers.

The bioregional attitude also transforms our modern tendency to be excessively mobile. It inclines us to settle down in some specific place, learn that place, connect to the mystery of that place, and assume responsibility for the quality of human life and the quality of the more-than-human life in that place. This basic bioregional attitude entails dedicating ourselves--making a covenant or a marriage--to specific places. We may get divorces and marry other places, but we take these transitions seriously. We don't just move and move and move in order to be upwardly mobile in the fabrics of some transnational corporation.

So how does this sense of bioregional home become a middle way between anarchy and collusion with the established civilizations? How does this bioregional beginning point issue in a third mode of human society that is neither a return to tribal antiquity nor a mere moderation of industrial civilization?

1. Bioregionalists, when true to our natural groundings, can agree with anarchists that industrial civilization was not always here and need not always be here. We built it. We can unbuild it. We opted for it. We can walk away from it. Furthermore, we need to walk away from civilization because it is an unworkable pattern for the future. Especially such concepts as "sustainable growth," must be laughed into oblivion. We have come to the place where no overall growth of the human footprint on this planet is sustainable. Effectiveness and equity can be improved, but "growth" is not the right word for that.

2. Bioregionalists, when true to our natural groundings, can also agree with the scientists and technological wizards of the civilizational period that a planet-wide human presence of five to seven billion people will need all the imagination and wizardry of the modern era in order to envision, build, and maintain a sustainable human social form. We can also profit from the wisdom of precivilization societies--for example, their deep intuitions of equity and bonding with nature as well as their quite objective knowledge of herbs and other accumulations of experience often ignored by modern science. Nevertheless, a complete return to precivilization modes of technology and thinking is an untenable vision for our viable future.

3. Bioregionalists, when true to our natural groundings, can affirm the baby steps we have made toward the dethronement of kings and moneyed aristocracies. We can join the planet-wide cry for more democracy, and we can yoke this vision of full democracy with a vision of total ecology--thereby building a form of governance that honors in our decision-making the needs of every living being and every living system of beings. Humans are going to have to make these decisions and carry them out. But humans can find ways to bring all living beings to the decision-making table. This planet is our larger body. Its health is our health; its misery is our misery.

Both radical anarchist thinking and current economic theory oppose big and powerful governments. But nothing less than big and powerful governments can referee the economic playing field. Only strong referees can throw bad players out of the economic game, protect regional economies, enable people to honor and protect their home environments, curtail both violent reactionaries and violent futurists, and give some sort of long-range design to the continual emergence of new social forms for centuries to come. Big government need not own or micro-manage economic activities. Government can be limited to providing basic order and refereeing the economic playing field in terms of common values. Such order makes possible actual free enterprise within those limits. Such a free-market economy, ordered by popular consensus rather than by wealthy profit-makers, solves the problems that both socialism and traditional capitalism fail to solve.

The issue is not the mere bigness of government, but the control of big government by still

bigger business. If an effective democratic process is working, a process that makes local decisions locally and makes decisions of larger scope through a fair and cooperative confederation of local power, then big government can be liberating rather than oppressive. A firm enforcement of the popular consensus is not oppressive; it is the self-discipline of the human family by the human family.

In quite different ways radical anarchists and neo-liberal economists propose a ruleless society (at least ruleless for some). Behind this drive for an unrefereed game of life is a huge misunderstanding, an idolizing of human license and a misnaming of that license as “freedom.” True freedom of the human spirit is the ability to abandon obsolete rules, to create better rules, and to do this while realizing that all rules are made for humanity, not humanity for the rules. True freedom knows that rules are created to restrain unfreedom, to limit the license of sloth and arrogance and greed and envy and lust and jealousy and rage and to force humanity to define what free responsibility actually looks like. Good rules or laws also assist humanity to carry out free responsibility in a semi-orderly fashion.

Rigid moralism is a human perversion, but rule-making itself is not. Responsible rule-making is rooted in a true understanding of the natural planet and its regions. Wolves obey the rules of the wolf pack. Horses obey the rules of the horse herd. Lions obey the rules of the lion pride. All primate communities have their communal customs to which members submit. There are also interspecies accommodations, customs, and honorings. Wild living forms are disciplined and sensitive to the limits of life around them. The exceptions to this are deluded humans and their domesticated animals. This thesis about the disciplined quality of wild species cannot be thoroughly documented in one paragraph, but this thesis can be tested and found to be true. Obeying appropriate limits is what is natural. Anarchy is unnatural.

Free responsibility does not mean being ruleless. Free responsibility is responsibility for the rules and for their reform and for their enforcement. Such living is natural. While both rigid moralism and boundless license are unnatural, the vast creativity of human rule-making can be practiced as an enrichment of our natural wildness.

Here is an even sterner truth: those who renounce all rules for themselves typically oppress others with rules made for others only. The transnational corporations want rules that protect their license from governments, unions, and ecologists. Protesting anarchists want cops and governments and corporations to obey the rules which most anarchists claim are unnecessary in their own future “natural” society.

Bioregionalism is a middle way between anarchy and collusion with established civilizations. Bioregionalists occupy this middle position because they are open to obeying the mysterious limits of nature and making choices accordingly. These choices will include the creation of long-range rules that appropriately limit human behavior. Such creative rule-making is freedom. And obeying these creative rules is freedom as well.

Bioregionalism is not the only relevant movement, but it carries some key awarenesses needed by the entire vanguard of the Earth. Bioregional openness to the possibilities and limitations of nature includes openness to the wisdom of both the tribal and the civilizational modes of human society. Bioregionalism can affirm three things about tribal life for every one it rejects. Bioregionalism can affirm three things about civilization for every one it rejects. And most important of all, bioregionalism can heed the call to create three never-before-existing modes of living for every one it relegates to the scrap heap of history.

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