BIOREGIONALISM, COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: AN APPROACH TO GEOGRAPHICAL BORDERLINES

Dominique Waissbluth*

After some introductory remarks in section 1 on the bioregionalist project, section 2 advances an outline of bioregionalism in view of its implementation in communities. Section 3 examines the concepts of community and locality, assessing their respective relevance for bioregionalism. In turn, section 4 addresses concerns regarding the aims and scope of bioregionalism. In particular, I intend to demonstrate that the bioregionalist move needs yet further development in order to thoroughly represent a live alternative in the environmental ethical debate on sustainability and borderline.

Keywords: bioregionalism; environmental ethics; community; geographical borderlines.

BIOREGIONALISMO, COMUNIDAD Y ÉTICA MEDIOAMBIENTAL: UNA APROXIMACIÓN A LOS LÍMITES GEOGRÁFICOS

Luego de algunas observaciones introductorias sobre el bioregionalismo en la sección 1, describo las líneas generales de la doctrina bioregionalista en vistas de su implementación en comunidades en la sección 2. La sección 3 examina los conceptos de comunidad y localidad, evaluando la relevancia de ellos para el proyecto bioregionalista. La sección 4 aborda los objetivos y los límites del bioregionalismo.

* Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics School of Historical and Philosophical Studies University of Melbourne. Correo electrónico: dominique.wk@hotmail.com

En particular, intento demostrar que el bioregionalismo requiere de desarrollos y refinamientos ulteriores para representar una alternativa legitima en el debate en ética medioambiental sobre sustentabilidad y límites.

Palabras clave: bioregionalismo; ética medioambiental; comunidad; límites geográficos

1. Introductory Remarks

A bioregional project represents an interesting option within the debate on borderline issues, since it deals with a new conception of a more sustainable reorganization of land. However, bioregionalism conveys consequences beyond this because it advocates a continuous understanding of land, its resources and human beings dwelling it. In particular, bioregionalism focuses on the importance of locality in various aspects. These include local resources and the capacity of being self-sufficient, the connection with land developed by dwellers and the local knowledge they provide to improve a sustainable relationship with the environment.

Overall, bioregionalism is an ecophilosophical position that puts to work a holistic conception of our relationship with the place in which we live. It encompasses areas as diverse as politics, cultural studies and ecology. The core tenet of bioregionalism is that human activity should ideally be restricted to subsist out of the local resources of a distinctive ecological and geographical region. Such regions are called *bioregions* or *life-places*, which are defined physically as well as culturally. Among the physical and environmental features that define a bioregion we find, for instance, watershed boundaries, the savannah, and the climatic zone and soil characteristics. Likewise, a bioregion is also determined by cultural phenomena, such as local cultural inbreeding, local knowledge for finding out solutions to local issues, and so forth.

In order to be precise about why bioregionalism can be understood as an ecophilosophy, let me draw on Kovel's definition of the sub-discipline: "An 'ecophilosophy' represents a comprehensive orientation that combines the understanding of our relation to nature, the dynamics of the ecological crisis, and the guidelines for rebuilding society in an ecocentric direction[1]."

1 KOVEL, J, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* Zed Books, London-New York, 2007, p. 187.

Bioregionalism appears beneficial in various ways. It argues that it is necessary to look at local rather than global approaches, attempting to find a suitably realistic method to tackle major environmental problems. As to the latter, a local way of addressing the challenges that bioregions face promises to be more beneficial than global strategies, as is argued below.

Sale was the one who firstly addressed the factual possibility of elaborating a bioregionalist project. Sale focuses on the importance of knowing the place we inhabit in view of becoming what he calls *dwellers in the land*, where this means the condition of being in closer connection with the surrounding environment. This invites to recover some of the wisdom and the sense of inhabiting that can be found in native communities and encourages developing them further in modern times.

To recover certain ideas from native communities does not amount to reenact everything. Instead, it only aims at figuring out whether different views of the world can still be useful. For instance, within the knowledge of indigenous cultures we may find useful practices, such as herbal medicine or observations about how to identify suitable grounds for building. Such knowledge comes from the close relationship with the environment. This broadly illustrates that indigenous communities were largely shaped by, and adapted to, their specific geographic areas. Hence, looking at this through the lens of bioregionalism, expertise, whether intellectual or fundamentally experiential, needs to be taken into account when it comes to the examination of bioregions.

Sale states that a particular bioregion is a specific region definable by natural rather than political boundaries[2]. A bioregion runs with flexibility and fluidity as nature does, and with the ability to support the life of human and non-human communities. Furthermore, in the bioregional picture, territorial borderlines are not strictly defined, but sensed and felt by the inhabitants of a specific community. This, along with some additional ecological knowledge, can facilitate the task of identifying a bioregion.

2 SALE, K, "Principles of Bioregionalism" in *The case against the global economy: and for a turn toward the local*, first edition, Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. Sierra Books, San Francisco, 1996, p. 475.

According to Sale, we find the following three delimitations of a bioregion, namely: *ecoregion, georegion* and *morphoregion*. Ecoregion is the widest, most encompassing of the three. It refers to the broadest distribution of native vegetation and soil types. Yet, ecoregion is also the most imprecise of the three and many bioregionalists now agree that a distinction between several bioregions can be made through a biotic shift. Here, the problem for bioregionalists is to determine the precise percentage-change of both flora and fauna that demarcates one bioregion from another. Such a change, if it takes place, tends to be gradual, and hence it makes difficult to individuate bioregions with precision. It should be kept in mind, however, that the imprecision regarding the delimitation of borderlines of bioregions is acknowledged without in principle being considered a problem. On the contrary, this imprecision supports the idea of borderlines perceived in a more fluid and natural manner.

The second delimitation is the concept of *georegion*. These are to be found within large ecoregions. In particular, a georegion is a smaller kind of bioregion shaped by physiographic features, such as river basins, valleys and mountain ranges, and most of the time with particular plant/animal traits. That is, a watershed, for instance, may be a distinctive kind of georegion, where people normally settle down nearby and pursue a lifestyle that accommodates the conditions of the land.

Finally, some places represent a further subdivision within georegions, which are called *morphoregions*. Smaller territories with identifiable natural landforms and distinctive life-forms characterise this subdivision. Towns are examples of this. To use an example similar to the watershed above, a morphoregion would be located at a section of the watershed, where the conditions change as the river flows from its headwaters to its mouth.

These divisions are not intended to be precise but they give a guideline of the elements that make up a bioregion. They are not, in this sense, normative descriptions of bioregions and need not be fulfilled as criteria for bioregions in every scenario. In contrast, the task of determining appropriate bioregional delimitations has to be carried out by the inhabitants of a particular area in each case. In this respect, Sale explains[3] that this way of decision-making is safer and more sensible towards the

3 *Ibidem*, p. 478.

environment than a normative prescription. The reason behind this is that bioregionalism takes seriously what is rooted in the history of the community as it is shown in its elderly members, especially since in some communities it may be the case that the latter are the ones who transmit the knowledge and understanding (i.e., the lore) of how to work out and survive in a specific environment. The point worth making, in this respect, is that it would not in principle be a problem if the delimitation of a bioregion were left in the hands of the inhabitants themselves, granted that the community has developed a bioregional sensibility.

Along with the geographical aspect of what comprises a bioregion, Thayer outlines main five components: physiographic, biotic, cultural, spiritual and artistic. The physiographic dimension looks into bioregions as physical spaces, which are geographically legitimate and identifiable as an operative, spatial unit[4]. The biotic aspect defines bioregions in terms of the inhabitant communities, both human and non-human, which dwell in certain regions and apparently give indications of particular ecological adaptations[5]. There is yet the cultural element, which takes human culture, in particular, to be the best-suited aspect when it comes to defining regions and the size of communities[6]. As to the spiritual feature, it does not necessarily refer to religious traditions; rather, it deals with the sense of belonging and attachment to a certain region, which usually results from the immersion in a particular bioregional culture[7]. Finally, concerning the artistic dimension, it emphasises the idea of local art, which helps to support the bioregional culture[8].

The biotic perspective is the core ground from which other specific views on bioregionalism arise. Its main proposal can be stated thus: we all live in a place that is not only ours, but shared with several members of both human and non-human species. Overall, the biotic perspective claims that a sound conception of bioregions should focus on pursuing the best way to live our lives and let others live theirs within the shared region. Furthermore, contrary to the physiographic view, which only takes

4 THAYER, R. L. Jr., *Life-Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, California 2003, p.15.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 33.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 59.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 71.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 94.

into consideration geographical factors, the biotic stance encompasses a wide variety of elements that make up the environment in which we live. Yet, there is no suggestion as to how humans should sort out their relationship with the big biotic and abiotic ecosystems with which they interact. As I understand this, the definition of the cultural perspective introduces the relevance of humankind as a decisive factor, which tends to border on a strong form of anthropocentricism. Although the cultural aspect may be highly relevant to promote an understanding of the links between humans and their environment, this, I think, should be done in a sensible manner, as some indigenous views illustrate.

Bioregionalism acknowledges the limitations and potential of the immediate place where people inhabit in socially inclusive, ecologically regenerative and spiritual ways. In this respect, the inclusion of a spiritual aspect in a bioregion gives an understanding of bioregionalism as the concept that allows the incorporation of environmental concerns together with traditional wisdom. It makes progress in advancing some shared concepts, which are suitable for making decisions as to the land. Moreover, it considerably enriches knowledge and awareness, insofar as it makes explicit the importance of the relationship between humans and land in a meaningful manner.

The connection between land and human life is vital in different respects. It can be claimed that the link between land and human life is vital. The actual, concrete ground is what connects humans to the nature and bioregionalism relies on this connection to enhance the importance of local resources and local knowledge. The recognition of bioregionalism as a suitable project is the acceptance of the need to reassemble the world in an integrative manner. Following this line of argument, Kemmis[9] has recently advocated the idea that the role of a place is relevant when it comes to political and cultural issues in a democratic community. As Kemmis claims[10], civic participation needs a tangible object that comprises people, viz., a shared place that gathers members of a community.

As a result, there is the question of how a bioregion should be characterised, granted that it is mainly determined as a collective human endeavour. It is important to

9 See *Ibidem*, p. 65.

10 *Idem*.

clarify that bioregionalism is still a project and there is certainly room for further development. As such, bioregionalism encourages the pursuit of the following ideas[11]:

- Bioregions should be determined by the nature of specific regions: one should identify oneself with such place and grow attached to it.
- They must safeguard both human and non-human species, organisms, and so forth.
- They should encompass tangible objects as both being shared and of social value – this applies to the consideration of watersheds, habitats, species, and the like.
- They allow direct communication in real time and space.
- They must be created on the basis of mutual trust.
- They are dependent on local wisdom and knowledge as the vital ingredients of a community.
- They should find their rationale in common sense, creativity, ethics, intuition, memory and reason.
- Likewise, bioregions should be impartial and socially just by means of symmetrical power arrangements.
- They should be able to create social capital and to build problem-solving capacity.
- They are to be innovative when it comes to establishing institutional cooperation and horizontal networks.
- They should invest in the future.
- They should support communities of both place and interest.
- They should guarantee good quality of life.
- They must be regenerative.
- They are expected to be respectful of natural boundaries that often extend across political demarcations.
- They need to be adaptable to both internal and external change.

It is worth noting that there is no place that exactly and entirely meets this list of features. Overall, these characteristics are only meant to serve as a guide that a bioregionalist project should keep in mind in order to bring the theory down to the actual application to specific bioregions.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 67.

2. How to Plan a Bioregion

Bioregions need to be delimited by some kind of spatial demarcation in order to work properly. This is mainly because there are a variety of bioregions, and each one should respond to their unique nature and culture for the sake of their best interests. Along these lines, it may seem that there should be as many different approaches to bioregionalism as there are different life-places.

Likewise, the planning of a bioregion should consider time in order to foster awareness and knowledge of how the land works and changes through different seasons of the year. For example, if a community decides to create a bioregion in the state of Victoria, Australia, a long-term study of the fluctuations of temperature, rainfall, wind, soil quality, among other geo-climate factors, should be undertaken in order to make decisions about the delimitation of the bioregion and the good use of local and seasonal resources. This should be done, of course, in considering the culture and history of such place.

One of the steps towards turning this project into a reality is to locate and recognise the capacities and resources that a particular region offers. Even though this might sound as if it would only apply to rural dwellers, this view might also work for urban dwellers in the sense of "learning the details of the trade and resource dependency between city and country and the population limits appropriate to the region's carrying capacity[12]".

With the recognition of the capacities of a region, self-reliance at a collective level is a necessary and inherent element in bioregional projects. Note that transporting goods and services at the fast pace that is required nowadays results in a waste of energy and resources, which in turn can contribute creating dependent regions[13]. The other side of this problem is the exportation and exploitation of the region's natural resources, which in some cases is favoured, discarding the possibility of using these resources for the purpose of improving the region itself. Concerning this, bioregio-

12 SALE, K, "Principles of Bioregionalism" in *The case against the global economy: and for a turn toward the local*, first edition, Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. Sierra Books, San Francisco, 1996, p. 473.

13 For more information on the relationship between transportation and energy consumption: https://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch8en/conc8en/ch8c2en.html.

nalism aims at reversing this situation, recommending the notion of self-reliance on the region's particular goods.

Both Thayer and Sale agree that a bioregion should work according to the criteria of sustainability and self-sufficiency. According to these criteria, cities and their surroundings should look at the possibility of replacing their imports with their own raw materials, goods and services. In other words, in a bioregional system, economy needs to focus firstly on maintaining rather than exporting its goods, adapting and conserving natural resources, thus promoting a better interaction with the surrounding natural environment. Consequently, people in a bioregional economy should establish a system of production and exchange rather than encourage a system that grows towards constant consumption. The use of local resources is to be promoted, whereas trade should be restricted to their surpluses. All of these measures aim at two things: a greater environmental consciousness of the available resources and preventing some bioregions to control others through monopolising a resource. It is important to remember that the relevance of self-sufficiency in the conception of an ideal place is not a new idea. In *Politics*, Book I, Aristotle talks about self-sufficiency in terms of *autárkeia* as one of the features that makes a community perfect, or more specifically, a perfect *polis*[14].

According to bioregionalism, the use and handling of goods is to rely on local producers rather than global ones. Markets and a widespread use of greenhouses would be employed to deliver seasonal foods. Regarding industry, local artisans would provide products made out of natural material and use non-polluting processes. These products would need to be of high quality so as to reduce waste and pollution; in turn, they would contribute to improving public health. Consequently, a system like this would try to eliminate economic issues like inflation or unstable currency, since it would reduce expenditures on outside products and the income would be made through local resources[15]. Energy sources and transportation in a bioregional project would be under the same conditions as any other kind of resource. This means that self-sufficiency and non-polluting processes need to be considered. For instance, some bioregions may depend on solar power,

14 ARISTÓTLES, *Política*, Libro I, 1252a1 – 1252b9. Editorial Gredos, España, 2000.

15 SALE, K, "Principles of Bioregionalism" in *The case against the global economy: and for a turn toward the local*, first edition, Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. Sierra Books, San Francisco, 1996, p. 481.

which of course is related to specific geo-climate conditions[16]. When it comes to transportation, other bioregions can depend on alternative kinds of energy like human-powered machines, electric vehicles and trains, walking and biking, and so forth.

Thus far, the argument shows that self-sufficiency is a key element for bioregions according to Sale and Thayer. This means that bioregions need to adapt to their particular circumstances. Ideally, bioregions should be able to develop their own energy based on available resources, to grow enough food according to the climate and soil conditions, and to favour the use and production of goods and products from local crafters, artisans and industry. Nevertheless, self-sufficiency should not be misunderstood as a step towards isolation from other bioregions in both communication and trade. These connections with other communities can be undertaken within strict conditions, such as being non-dependent, non-monetary and non-injurious.

Along with self-sufficiency, there is another concept that a bioregion needs to fulfil: the principle of cooperation. An exchange of knowledge, techniques and innovations in such disciplines as science, culture and politics are especially required in a self-sufficient bioregion. In view of this, creating rigid barriers would be the wrong way to go. A bioregion needs to preserve itself. Thus, it is important to be open to the influence of other communities and ideas. In this regard, Sale claims: "The successful ecosystem requires its many parts to operate smoothly together, regularised and interdependent over time[17]". Accordingly, cooperation is what triggers a proper functioning of all the other characteristics of a bioregion. Cooperation is vital for any community that seeks to make better use of the available resources.

Another important feature of the development of a bioregion is that the knowledge of what best suits each life-place should not only consider the experts' advice but also the experience of the inhabitants. Sometimes, the best solutions for the development of a life-place can be found in collaboration between both the technological knowledge of expertise and traditional wisdom. This point has been made in the following terms:

> "[A] city region develops best when it preserves and enhances the abilities of local citizens to respond to economic opportunities, replaces

16 *Ibidem*, p. 480.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 483.

> imports to the greatest extent possible, adjusts its extractive industrial base to one that can be sustained over the long term without despoliation, and seeks the highest quality for its natural resources, ecosystems, and quality-of-life amenities[18]".

Contemporary discussions in philosophical ethics have emphasised as a growing concern the fact that humans need to know how to inhabit in a way that is more attuned to their surroundings. This is why localisation movements and their thinking regarding bioregions are a subject matter of lively discussion. The essential change of how to conceive our life-place and the interaction with it should arise from, on the one hand, the realisation that we all live here and now together in this place, so to speak; whereas on the other hand, from the challenge of promoting and facilitating the well-being of future generations. There is a mutual dependency between the place and us as human beings.

Naturally, the planning of a life-place is not to be addressed as a task for precise scientific know-how. No universally accepted set of rules and procedures is available to be followed. By contrast, the planning itself is to be open to discussions in order to benefit from the input of different sources. From a philosophical perspective, bioregionalism is still an evolving trend that needs further elaboration and a detailed defence so as to gain wider acceptance. It needs, for instance, a change in the way we educate children, targeting issues of integration and making explicit that it affects the life of people as a whole in important respects.

3. Community, Locality and Its Relevance for Bioregionalism

According to bioregionalism –and surely according to most ethical projects that seek to promote a sound environmental dwelling– the relevance of communities should not be overlooked. Among the ideas regarding communities[19], there is one that states that communities, whether human or not, are essentially groups of individuals that

18 THAYER, R. L. Jr., *Life-Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, California, 2003, p.119.

19 For more information on how to conceive the concept of community in this paper please refer to WOOD and JUDIKIS. *Conversations on Community Theory*, United States: Purdue University Press, 2003.

survive through self-sufficiency and adaptation to the surrounding conditions[20]. Sale clarified this in an example he puts forward regarding the ten-year, cross-cultural survey of the anthropologist Murdoch, who aims at reporting that communities are an intrinsic part of human life. "The institution of the community occurs 'in every known human society'", claims Sale[21]. Therefore, it seems that for the bioregional project, communities, culture and wisdom are all core elements to be taken into consideration when pursuing bioregional practices. It comes as no surprise that people who live in a particular place come to develop a specific knowledge of their region[22]. As to the practical dimension, it seems that people in such a situation tend to care about their place more sincerely than people who do not experience the feeling of belonging to it. In this regard, the benefits of an environmental ethical view that promotes a way of life in which communities take better care of their environment goes without mentioning.

Although things such as socio-political demarcations and the strong influence of globalisation influence the existence of communities, advocates of bioregionalism observe that people are still prone to describe the place they inhabit in rather natural terms. This is another example that shows how underestimated is our relationship with the land. Moreover, it demonstrates the importance of such relationship in the development of a suitable way of understanding our bioregion.

As mentioned before, indigenous people have a view of the world that shares some similarities with what bioregionalism aims for. In this regard, it can be claimed that bioregionalism is not a new proposal after all. In contrast, it can be interpreted as a modern turn of some conceptions of the way of living found in indigenous communities. Even though bioregionalist considerations came about from the contemporary discussion in environmental ethics, some indigenous communities have already put in practice an interaction with their environment, relying on a close relationship with the land they inhabit.

20 See SALE, "Principles of Bioregionalism" in *The case against the global economy: and for a turn toward the local*, first edition, Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith, Sierra Books: San Francisco, 1996, p. 476.

21 *Ibidem*., p. 479.

22 Avery Kolers is another author that takes into consideration the importance of the knowledge of the land and the close relationship of people with the place they inhabit. Even though he takes these claims to assess a specific borderline issue (Israel and Palestine), his analysis is worth to mention for deeper and further research. For more information please refer to KOLERS, Avery. *Land, Conflict and Justice. A Political Theory of Territory*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

To clarify the lessons that bioregionalism can draw from indigenous communities, a suitable example to consider is the Yagan community, which were the aboriginal people who inhabited a region in the Chilean southern-most Patagonia. As a first remark, Yaganes developed their whole lifestyle, language and architecture in a close relationship with the features of and the conditions imposed by their environment, thus responding to challenges such as lack of natural resources and strenuous environmental constraints. Among the latter, it is worth mentioning that in the areas where the Yaganes lived, especially on Navarino Island, the average temperature in the warmest month is 9.6°C, and the lowest temperature reaches 1.9°C. Winds, on the other hand, can reach up to 140 km/h in relatively urbanised areas, whereas measurements of wind velocity in rural areas vary radically given the predominance of flat pampas[23]. In view of this, the Yaganes community adopted practices that facilitated the interaction with their environment and, in the end, survival. Furthermore, it can be contended that they largely adapted successfully since evidence in historical registers demonstrates their ability to survive and reproduce.

I should observe that I am aware of a series of problems that an indigenous analogy involves. The example of the Yaganes community is not meant to support the claim that indigenous people instantiate a perfect system of interaction between humans and their environment. By contrast, some indigenous communities have, perhaps unintentionally, threatened other species. One example to consider is the early Maori culture, which drove a great variety of bird species into extinction[24]. Yet, leaving for the time being such cases apart, the main reason for bringing up the idea of indigenous views of the environment is as follows: they invite to reconsider some of their experiences that can be useful for carrying out a bioregional project.

In short, the bioregionalist appeal to indigenous studies faces a series of difficulties. For one thing, it would be unrealistic, if not plainly absurd, to endorse the view that communities have to follow the indigenous path in our modern times. It would not make much sense to claim that bioregions and the lifestyles they promote have to be regulated by the distribution of trout colonies, and the like. Harmony between humans and other creatures is what bioregionalism encourages; however, in order to do so it has to proceed in an integrative manner, considering cultural, political,

23 See http://www.ecolyma.cl/documentos/bioclimatografia_de_chile.pdf

24 See http://www.terranature.org/extinctBirds.htm for more information.

social and economic features, which vary from one bioregion to another, and from one community to another.

4. Concerns Regarding Bioregionalism

Some issues emerge with a project like bioregionalism and clearly in the literature on this topic there are some authors that provide a range of criticisms such as Brennan and Kovel. Among these, Brennan criticises a radical version of this view called *homely bioregionalism*. The critique highlights the problematic position of this view given the thin line that separates it from a totalitarian system. There is, for instance, the issue that it gives a romanticised conception of *home*.

In another respect, Kovel purports to show the apparent impracticality of one key idea of the bioregionalist project, which is the notion of self-sufficiency and its implications regarding political and geographical boundaries, resources and transportation, are deemed to be obscure. To clarify this, there may be some bioregions that might, for instance, need imports to survive. This would be the case of Punta Arenas, a city in the southern-most Patagonia in Chile. As to this specific case, note that due to its climate and soil conditions, Punta Arenas cannot produce, among other things, citrus fruit[25]. Given that such fruits are recommended in human diet so as to avoid scurvy[26], this case makes bioregionalism look flawed.

Bioregionalism appears at first glance to be an appealing doctrine, since it connects ideals of community and economics with the idea of going *back to the basics*. Here, the main concern is not merely about location but rather about the concrete ecological workings of a part of the Earth: "the flows of watersheds, the lay of the hills, the kinds of soils, the biota that inhabit a bioregion, all regarded as the organic substrate of a community built on human scale and dedicated to living gently on the earth and not over it[27]".

25 This is mainly because Punta Arenas has a subpolar oceanic climate that does not allow proper growing conditions for most kinds of citrus fruits. Data for this was collected from: http://164.77.222.61/climatologia/publicaciones/Estadistica_ClimatologicaIII.pdf

26 For more information about scurvy: http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/125350-overview

27 KOVEL, J, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* Zed Books, London-New York, p. 191.

Concerning Brennan's criticisms, they stem from the idea of homely bioregionalism. Homely bioregionalism is a version of what bioregionalism can become, which Brennan depicts as having "(…) totalitarian overtones and, even when interpreted as an empirical recommendation, incorporates an optimistic and romanticised conception of 'home'"[28]. In particular, homely bioregionalism is meant to tackle the *bioregional denial*, which is the collective feeling of preferring external standards of ethical practice and beauty over the community's own, given its flora and fauna. The main effect of the so-called bioregional denial is that there is always a constant pressure of attempting to emulate physically and artificially *ideal places* to inhabit, which are supposed to meet the globalised standards of both ethical practice and beauty.

As an example of this phenomenon, Brennan mentions the case of Perth in Western Australia. In his view, Perth seeks to imitate places like California. In particular, Perth's government has imported foreign flora, mainly palm trees. They have also named streets with names of attractive places such as Secret Harbour, Meadow Springs, and Windsor Hills, all of them referring to places that are generally considered more attractive than the environment that Perth provides. Nevertheless, opposed to this trend, there are people like the hill dwellers in Perth, who have not succumbed to this bioregional denial. By contrast, they persist in living a life that actively reaffirms some aspects of bioregionalism.

It is worth noting that both ways of living in this example are considered "places", in Proust's sense[29] – viz., a life bound up with places through time, memory and experiences. Nonetheless, something differentiates both ways of living, since hill dwellers seem to belong to land in a stronger sense than people in the city. In spite of this, Brennan claims that even in the case of bioregional denial, homely bioregionalism does not correctly address this phenomenon. In fact, as I examine below drawing on Brennan's ideas, to do so may result in even worse situations.

What bioregionalism suggests in view of living in an ethically acceptable way, which is conducive to happiness and well-being, is a closer identification with the environment. Studying the surrounding nature, understanding it and caring for it, would be the best way to reach self-fulfilment. This being opposed to a massified

28 BRENNAN, A, "Bioregionalism—a Misplaced Project?" *Worldviews* 2: 215-37, 1998, p. 215.

29 *Ibidem*, pp. 218-219.

view of society, as in the case mentioned above, shows another goal of bioregionalism: to decentralise the government. However, even supposing that there is a potential of self-development in a bioregional way for specific, decentralised regions, this does not explain why a bioregion should be taken as the main ground of a political community.

Moreover, we can still call into question the overall relevance of the bioregionalist view, given that it can still be argued that people can have a feeling of responsibility towards the environment without adopting a bioregionalist stance[30]. Here is a passage that I take from Brennan: "Why should the boundaries of bioregions, their beginnings and endings, be of any consequence to morals, politics, aesthetics or even to environmentalists? (…) We can still care for the land if our community straddles two, or twenty-two bioregions[31]."

Pursuing this line of argument, it can be observed that the main issues of homely bioregionalism can be categorised into three general dimensions: social, political and belonging. The social criticism regards how some tightly knit communities, which are closer to the notion of bioregions, can be places that favour intolerance, stifling originality and leading to abuse, prejudice and victimising or destroying the weak. In other words, in order to have strongly cohesive communities, it appears that a price of the diminution of individuality and self-assertiveness must be paid.

As to the second concern, Brennan puts forward a strong criticism regarding the potential of homely bioregional in political matters, given the potential negative effects that such a hypothetical community appears destined to face. If in principle these bioregions could successfully exist, it is unlikely that they could provide a liberal polity for free people. One of the reasons behind this is that bioregionalism and its reading through homely bioregionalism require communities to be self-sufficient and to have what seems to be an excessive sense of identification with the place they inhabit. This combination of autarkic living and identification can be extended to the relationship between people and the particular state that governs them. As Brennan

30 It is worth mentioning, however, that this is not the only reason for advocating bioregionalism. This is just to mention one of the critiques that Brennan points out.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 227.

maintains, "what damages the state damages each of us"[32]. Bearing this in mind, it seems easy for a totalitarian regime to arise if bioregionalism is granted: "If the bioregion is the *fons et origo* of the polity, then bioregional identification will translate pretty quickly into political identification"[33]. Let it suffice to emphasise that an excessive absorption in the community's practices and goals can become one form or other of regional nationalism, which subsumes people in the naïve way of thought that they just dwell in their regions, while ignoring a wider universe of other places and other people.

There is a third criticism that has to do with the question of belonging, which Brennan firstly relates to the notion of memory and experience. Here is the outline of this counterargument. In order to build a nationalist mindset, memory is an important factor, as Sorlin describes with the phenomenon of the colonization of the United States[34]. The problem in this case is that the first colonists that arrived in the United States would not have been able to create memories in that place, since they were just arriving. Hence, the place could not be understood as the idea of *home* within this sense of belonging. However, as Casey points out[35], examples of this kind are inaccurate. This is because the places with which pioneers deal do not constitute *a home from the very beginning*. Yet, there may be a chance to construct an identity – which is in its infancy, so to speak – thereby not being considered as places of possible historical belonging in the first place. Only aboriginals, as the primary inhabitants of the land, could be considered to be at *home* in what is at some point a hostile living place for colonists. Secondly, Brennan also criticises the aspect of belonging in relationship with an extreme sense of identification with Nature: "I identify with Nature to the extent that its interests are assumed by me (see the discussion of this in Plumwood 1993, Ch. 7). What damages Her damages me. This, of course, is plain silly. I want the trees in my garden to flourish, and I am disappointed if they do not[36]."

Considering this, two general threats emerge: first, the intensified absorption of the individual in nature, which means that the individual abandons herself to the natural or-

32 *Ibidem*, p. 230.

33 *Idem*.

34 *Ibidem*, p. 229.

35 *Idem*.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 230.

der; whereas, second, the adoption of nature by the self, converting the needs and desires of someone in particular into natures' needs and desires. The main concern with the first issue is that it leads to dispossession, loss of subjectivity and identity; while the second describes an egomaniac assumption of unrestrictedly humanising our surroundings in order to understand it in *our* terms. Against this, when talk about belonging and identification, it appears necessary to have a certain degree of separation. Taking some distance comes to be a healthy thing to do if one is interested in making clear the ethical relevance of these views. To be able to separate oneself from something gives the chance to recognise both the object and self. Jessica Benjamin explains this in the following terms: "True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognising the other[37]".

Allow me to move on now to the examination of Kovel's critical appraisal of bioregionalism. The author firstly claims that trying to extend bioregionalism as an ecophilosophy is a challenge, since the idea behind bioregionalism is incapable of properly guiding social transformation and social practice. Kovel explains that there are fundamental problems with some ideas in bioregionalism, such as the notion of boundaries that Sale investigates. One of these problems is posed by the notion of *area*, which in boundary terms seems quite vague. Sale, in particular, does not provide a proper clarification of such a concept when he develops his ideas on bioregionalist boundaries, even though he seems to defend a rather ambiguous parameter for such an issue. In addition, Sale argues that it is reasonable to leave the decision about boundaries of an area to the people that inhabit it, without giving any clue as for how to properly assess an actual reshape of a region without conflictive actions like expropriation.

Rethinking the boundaries between bioregions is not a small task. Previously I mentioned the case of what happens in a bioregional project if a region lacks certain vital resources to subsist. In a case like this, a strict bioregionalist will argue that these issues will be resolved with a morphoregion that includes enough areas with suitable resources to survive. Nonetheless, this will create another kind of problem, which is essentially cultural. Creating a morphoregion merely in terms of resources would be enough in some cases like uniting Argentinean and Chilean Patagonia, for example. However, this might not work, at least immediately, where countries hold strong pre-existing cultural conflicts. Furthermore, this is not a minor problem for a biore-

37 *Ibidem*, pp. 230-231.

gionalist project, since important differences arise between diverse land regions that would offer some sustainability for productive development.

Another issue is that Sale uses an idyllic image of the life of North American aboriginals as an example of a community that lived off the land and could distribute themselves along the lines of what he recognises as bioregions. Nevertheless, as Kovel points out, North American aboriginals' understanding of the world was established on the idea of holding land in common. This worldview collided with the colonisers' capitalist view of land as property. History shows the conflict between the concepts of property versus communal sharing in other cases, such as the Yaganes aboriginals and the Spanish colonisers. Yet, here is another turn for the same concern: these days, it would be extremely difficult, if not plainly impossible, to redesign the land so as to create a bioregionalist project, assuming that land remains a commodity to be exploited by people, as per current capitalist standards. This imposes a great obstacle for the viability of a bioregionalist project.

With the goal of defending their views as an ecophilosophy, advocates of bioregionalism need to establish a system based on self-sufficiency. One of the things this means is that, to begin with, each bioregion needs to develop its own particular energy according to its specific type of ecology. Yet, the capacity of bioregions to create enough resources can be questioned, even considering that an ecological society would try to manage the enhancement of energy efficiency and reduce needs. Not all regions are able to produce enough clean energy to supply the increasing demands of the modern world. According to Kovel, this way of tackling the issue of energy and resources is just a half-made solution that arises from a naturalised ideology rather than from a sound consideration of reality.
Sale does not appear to purposely imply the promotion of isolation among bioregions. In fact, he claims that bioregions should share knowledge with other bioregions as well as to share the necessary tools to help others become self-sufficient. However, the problem here lies in the restricted limits of connection and trading in a bioregionalist project – that is, connections must be non-dependent, non-monetary, and non-injurious. These are quite strict conditions and bioregionalism might be taking a step backwards instead of forwards. To be clear, let me divide and analyse the three conditions:

a. Non-dependent connections: A community controlling a resource that others might need can open the chance to an exacerbated dependency and, thus, the problem of taking advantage. Therefore, there should be connections between bioregions that do not fall into a strong dependency of each other. It is worth noting that for some places these connections are required for the sake of survival. The solution for this would call for the creation of a connection that does not leave anybody in a disadvantaged position.

b. Non-monetary connections: This tries to tackle problems such as inflation or deflation of currency. Nevertheless, all the work and energy invested in something needs to be reattributed in some way. With a non-monetary connection, what remains is barter. Then there is the issue of the rightful way of determining how many strawberries I can exchange for ceiling materials, and the like.

c. Non-injurious connections: This is one of the most reasonable conditions of connections that bioregionalism tries to encourage. To seek connections between regions that do not damage, or at least diminishes damage, is something that not only a bioregionalist project should advance but so should anyone who seeks a balanced relationship with the environment.

Even though Sale seems to encourage a minimum of trades, these need to fulfil the three conditions stated above. The problem with these conditions is that there will be cases where some places lack an important amount of vital resources and need to recur to imports and exports on a greater scale than bioregionalism allows. For these cases, barter seems an option to cope with this situation; yet it is not an ideal solution, since the problem with barter is how to determine the value of things in order to make a proportional transaction.

From this it seems that a bioregionalist project could be in need of some flexibility in some of its ground points. This is the main reason that I want to pursue a moderate version that rescues the relevant ideas of a bioregionalist project and also considers the criticisms.

5. Concluding Remarks

This article has examined the bioregionalist project, advancing an outline of this view and assessing the viability of its implementation in particular communities. I have shown that the concepts of community and locality play a key role when it comes to evaluating the aims and scope of bioregionalism. A moral we have derived is that even though it represents an attractive alternative in recent literature, the bioregionalist movement needs further refinement in order to be considered as a viable option within the environmental ethical debate on sustainability and borderline.

One of the key criticisms to bioregionalism concerns self-sufficiency and impracticability in today's world. Some regions may simply not subsist if they are restricted to surrounding resources only, as the case of Punta Arenas illustrates. Bioregionalism addresses this issue claiming the need of reshaping boundaries. Nevertheless, the way in which boundaries are defined is largely ambiguous. Although his may solve some problems with resources, it does not consider possible cultural or historical clashes between the countries or cities that would undergo reshaping.

Another issue with bioregionalism has to do with the romanticized ideas of *home* and *going back to the basics*. These conceptions lead to a range of problems if taken in an unrestricted fashion. Among them, the social and political concerns stand out. The autarkic living that bioregionalism suggests, along with a strong sense of identification, can lead to tightly knit communities, which threaten to turn to the adoption of intolerance to new changes and newcomers. Moreover, this leaves room for bioregionalism to have specific political agendas related to decentralization and development that may fail to provide a liberal polity to their inhabitants.

Most issues with the bioregionalist project may be tackled from a more flexible perspective. New research should pursue this line of investigation. Some, indeed, already authors recognize that bioregionalism as a concept and project is still quite a fertile idea[38].

38 Alexander, Donald. "Bioregionalism: Science or Sensibility?" in *Environmental Ethics 12* (2), 1990, pp. 161-173.

Bibliografía

Alexander, Donald. "Bioregionalism: Science or Sensibility?" in *Environmental Ethics 12* (2), pp. 161-173, 1990

Aristóteles. Política, Libro I, 1252a1 – 1252b9. España: Editorial Gredos, 2000

Brennan, Andrew. "Bioregionalism—a Misplaced Project?" *Worldviews* 2: 215-37, 1998

Kolers, Avery. Land, Conflict and Justice. A Political Theory of Territory, Cambridge University Press, 2009

Kovel, Joel. The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World? London-New York: Zed Books, 2007

Mcginnis, Michael Vincent. Bioregionalism. London and New York: Routledge. p. 22, 1999

Sale, Kirkpatrick. "Principles of Bioregionalism" in *The case against the global economy: and for a turn toward the local*, first edition, Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. San Francisco: Sierra Books, 1996

Thayer, Robert L. Jr. Life-Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2003

Wood, George S. Jr., Judikis, Juan C. Conversations on Community Theory. United States: Purdue University Press, 2002

Online Websites

- http://164.77.222.61/climatologia/publicaciones/Estadistica_ClimatologicaIII.pdf, accessed on the 20th of November 2016.
- http://www.ecolyma.cl/documentos/bioclimatografia_de_chile.pdf, accessed on the 26th of August 2016.
- http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/125350-overview, accessed on the 26th of August 2016.
- https://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch8en/conc8en/ch8c2en.html, accessed on the 8th of September 2016.
- http://www.terranature.org/extinctBirds.htm, accessed on the 8th of September 2016.