

**The Abstract Ecology of Modern Life: Re-imagining Environments as Public  
Spheres**

Jake P. Greear

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Political Science

Tim Luke (Chair)

Scott Nelson

Richard Rich

May 4, 2005

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: (ecology, democracy, political geography)

# The Abstract Ecology of Modern Life: Re-imagining Environments as Public

## Spheres

Jake P. Greear

### Abstract

*Many discourses within environmental political theory center on reconfiguring political structures to empower geographically situated populations to become public stewards of their local environments. However, in the developed world the hope for ecological self-government is doubly challenged by the atrophy of the civic spirit and the general apathy of most citizens in the face of environmental destruction. In a search for an explanation of these cultural circumstances this essay gathers the sociological critiques of the techno-scientific epistemology and the public management of risk offered by Ulrich Beck with some social studies of the production and use of space. These critiques reveal aspects of everyday life that comprise a distinctly disengaged mode of person-world interaction. This mode of subjective worldly interaction frustrates any decentralist environmental politics because it distills in consciousness a depressed conception of personal agency, and constructs local environments as realms of imperceptible significances and hopelessly complex “scientific” processes, which must be ascertained by external knowledge and judgment producers. Communal, political stewardship of local environments requires trusting humanly scaled faculties of perception and engaging in the work of producing local knowledge and judgments. It therefore entails refocusing attentive faculties on the local landscapes that bind publics together and re-appropriating these environments as realms of participatory civic agency. This politicization of the immediate environment may be the best hope for instilling ecologically sustainable values and for reintegrating, and therefore reviving, currently dysfunctional public spheres.*

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
CHAPTER TWO: The Radical Politics of Environmental Critiques	7
<i>Ethical dilemmas and practical questions for radical ecological critiques</i>	8
<i>Romanticism and “ecological consciousness”</i>	12
<i>Murray Bookchin and the politics of social ecology</i>	19
<i>The inescapable sociality of state capitalism</i>	21
<i>Challenges and opportunities for self-government in the context of environmental crisis</i>	27
CHAPTER THREE: An Abstract Ecology and its Vectors: Risk, Science, Cartography, and Urbanization	32
<i>The concept of a subjective ecology</i>	33
<i>Ulrich Beck and the political epistemology of risk</i>	35
<i>The evolving cultural profile of science</i>	41
<i>The abstract ecology of spatial practice; maps and urbanization</i>	47
<i>Situating the environment in discourse</i>	53
CHAPTER FOUR: Alternative Ecologies	57
<i>Daniel Kemmis and the role of places in politics</i>	57
<i>Wendell Berry and the ecologies of experts and clients</i>	63
<i>Living in the landscape</i>	66
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion	69

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

As the economic effects of the long-foretold “peak oil transition” begin to impose upon the global economy, and as the ecological effects of global energy and resource consumption continue to impose on the lives of people everywhere, the United States federal government is acting to further operationalize its entire territory, and perhaps the territories of some other nations, as the eminent domain of a centralized technocratic alliance of government agencies and big business charged with making the world safe for geometrical GDP growth. But while George W. Bush claims “technology is the ticket,”<sup>1</sup> for many others who are concerned about these issues, following ostensibly technical problems of energy shortages and environmental crises to their roots has meant venturing onto sociological turf, dissecting our “culture of denial,”<sup>2</sup> taking stock of “invisible walls”<sup>3</sup> that prevent environmental progress, and even “remaking society.”<sup>4</sup> And where the United States federal government, as well as many other powerful actors in the global

---

<sup>1</sup> Official White House press release, Office of the Press Secretary, April 27, 2005. “President Discusses Energy at National Small Business Conference.” Washington Hilton Hotel, Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> Bowers, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Seidell, 2001

<sup>4</sup> Bookchin, 1989

political economy, purport to address environmental problems and the energy crisis by taking technical, environmental, and economic decision-making power out of the hands of local populations, many ecological critics have espoused an opposite doctrine, claiming that decentralization of many aspects of political, economic, and technical systems is the best way to work toward a more ecologically sustainable society. As the global economic and environmental situation brings these two philosophies head-to-head in American politics the reality of the prevailing former perspective is becoming increasingly apparent. This thesis explores some of the challenges and possibilities attending the subordinated latter perspective.

The threat of “the Bomb” was for years the unrivaled travesty of the progress of Man. When Rachael Carson’s book Silent Spring warned of a looming environmental apocalypse, the sense of personal powerlessness in the face of universal tragedy was only reinforced. And by the time Garret Hardin showed, in his essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, how individual rationality could quite naturally lead to collective self-destruction, his thesis must have been already a widely prevalent suspicion. Many activists, politicians, scientists, academics, and social critics have gone scrambling for some kind of solution, or at least an explanation, of modernity’s difficulties, and a significant portion of them, particularly in the last half-century, have couched their critiques in terms of ecology, which was purported to be a uniquely subversive science.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter two begins with an exploration of the political thought associated with the more “radical” environmental critiques. I will argue that the most coherent political positions emerging from radical environmental thought center around reconfiguring

---

<sup>5</sup> Shepard and McKinley, 1969, named ecology “the subversive science.”

political structures to empower geographically situated populations to become public stewards of their local environments. However, in the developed world the hope for “ecologically sustainable” forms of self-government is doubly challenged by the atrophy of the civic spirit and the apparent apathy of most citizens in the face of environmental destruction.

In an attempt to explore and help explain these cultural circumstances I will suggest that some concepts, such as “ecology,” “environment,” and “habitat,” that have been fruitful in understanding complex biophysical systems may also be useful in theoretical explorations of culture, society, and politics. Specifically the concept “ecology,” when re-appropriated for a sociological discussion, can facilitate a discussion of how patterns of everyday life and certain ways of interacting with the world may affect citizens’ capacity for participatory democratic citizenship. Therefore this thesis elaborates on an understanding of “human ecology” that is subjective rather than objective. In other words, I will use this concept to refer to modes of physical, sensual, economic (in the broadest sense), and epistemic person-world interaction with a view to how these “ecologies” may shape the behaviors, values, habits, and mentalities of individuals and human communities.

This differs in its focus from the usage typical to the natural sciences wherein “ecology” is meant to capture the complex of physical interactions between humans or other organisms and the world with a view to how these organisms and environments physically act and react upon one another. Considering human ecology in the sense I intend would entail asking: what is the “habitat” of modern humans, or what is it, from an experiential standpoint, that people are inhabiting? How have human environments been

restructured physically and informationally? How has the highly technological economy of information, through which knowledge about the world is being produced, transmitted, appropriated and consumed, given new form to the arenas of the struggle for existence in which people manifest their lives?

A discussion of “human ecology,” in this subjective sense, can help illuminate the present social and political reality and some emerging alternative visions from the perspective of everyday life. To this end, chapter three attempts an exposition of a few aspects of how science, technology, cartography, and urbanization have changed lived environments and produced new ecologies, or new modes of inhabiting or dwelling in physical surroundings. Drawing together some elements of Ulrich Beck’s critiques of the scientific epistemology in “risk society” and some philosophical treatments of the production and habitation of space shows how these aspects of modern life, which have usually been viewed separately, might be viewed as constituent elements of a new way of experiencing and acting in the world; elements which are unified chiefly by their common tendency to decrease, insulate, and mediate the consequential, agentive interaction between human subjects and their material surroundings. I argue that the resulting sublation of a common physical world in consciousness tends to separate people by disconnecting them from a common world. Thus the abstract ecology has an attenuating effect on environmental sensibilities and on the potential for functional civic democracy in many populations within the developed world.

This alienation from the materiality of the public sphere by the world-mediating technologies of this abstract ecology is therefore a challenge to the decentralist, autonomist, or social anarchist politics advocated by many environmental critiques.

However, direct, democratic, political action in geographically defined realms of local sovereignty entails circumventing the abstract ecologies of modernized populations and can thus begin to reconnect people through consequential political agency to the physicality of an immediate environment. Therefore such a decentralization of political economy is also shown to be a means not only of expressing but also of fostering a more ethical or careful sensibility toward the non-human environment.

In advancing this thesis, chapter four will focus primarily on the political thought of Daniel Kemmis, who explores possibilities of remaking political institutions to give place-based communities more direct agency and responsibility in managing their own public affairs through direct democracy. Kemmis stresses the important role of places as elements of functional, political communities. However, Kemmis argues that the mutually constitutive relationship between place and political practice has been severed by the centralization and professionalization of politics. Drawing on the work of Wendell Berry, I attempt to expand upon Kemmis' analysis by suggesting that local environments, as the necessary and socially edifying medium of direct political action, have been subsumed in consciousness as many people have shifted "ecological" registers to the abstract "professional worlds" realized in a global economy, and away from the physical world of the immediate surroundings, which becomes a kind of user interface whose many complexities are the realm of the knowledge and agency of others.

Therefore I will suggest, in conclusion, that attempts to revitalize participatory democracy, or to move toward a new environmental ethics, must work toward the decentralization of political power, but it should also consider ways to restructure power relations usually considered outside the realm of politics that specifically affect the

interactions between people and the substances, objects, living things, machines, and spaces that compose their common world. Both the architectural production of the physicality of human environments and the techno-scientific economy of knowledge by which both built and un-built environments are negotiated bear on the scope and the depth of citizens' engagement with a world of things. Therefore it is possible that fostering ecologically sustainable values and revitalizing democratic practice depend largely on both restructuring these aspects of the subjective human ecology, and re-appropriating local environments as public spheres.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The Radical Politics of Environmental Critiques**

This chapter begins by exploring the aspirations and potentialities of radical environmental critiques of modernity for transforming the current relationship between industrialized human populations and the natural ecosystemic processes they depend upon. The focus of analysis here is upon the debates, discrepancies, and convergences of two radical ecological schools of thought known as “deep ecology” and “social ecology.” Careful critical analyses of this dialogue between these radical ecological critical discourses foregrounds the importance of historical political transformation to any change in human-environment relationships. Hashing out the issues broached in the critical theories of radical environmentalism and the debates among them has led many environmental political theorists to advocate similar alternatives to the globalizing regime of neo-liberal state-capitalism, alternatives which are based on decentralization, and more active, engaged forms of self-government at the local level. The social ecology of Murray Bookchin emerges here as the most completely articulated of such radical political arguments. However, I will suggest that the intertwined conceptualizing the self

and the outer world bear discussion here since they may have important implications for the workability of such political alternatives.

*Ethical dilemmas and practical questions for radical ecological critiques*

Most scholars, writers, activists, critics, and pundits who seek to paint a coherent picture of contemporary environmentalism divide it into two parts. Sometimes the distinction is made between “environmentalism” and “ecologism,” sometimes between “reform” or “mainstream environmentalism” and “radical environmentalism,” sometimes between “light green” and “dark green” politics, etc...<sup>6</sup> The unending appropriation and re-appropriation of words can lead to confusion, but the distinctions being made in most cases are very similar. Deep/radical environmentalism, or ecologism, generally includes any discourse asserting that “industrialism” or the “current system” is the problem, whereas mainstream/reform/shallow environmentalism houses any discourse maintaining that environmental problems should be solved using the “current system.” Exactly what ethical institutions, economic structures, political systems, or forms of consciousness fall inside “the system” and which fall outside, are questions on which there is little consensus. Still those who call for the ecological imperative of completely overthrowing the politics, economics, or ethics of Western modernity are rarely contested in calling themselves radical environmentalists.

Norwegian eco-philosopher Arne Naess made one of the earliest and most widely publicized arguments for such a distinction. The term “deep ecology” was first situated

---

<sup>6</sup> See Dobson, 2000; Kalinowski, 1997; and Dryzek, 1997 for a few examples of classificatory schemes for environmental thought.

in public and academic language in 1972 when Naess delivered a lecture called “The Shallow and the Deep: Long Range Ecology Movements—A Summary”<sup>7</sup> in which he laid out some fundamental tenets of the radical side environmental movement as he saw it developing.

Naess’ “deep ecology” rejects the humanistic instrumental approach to nature inherent in industrial capitalism, Lockean liberalism, and Abrahamic religious morality. Therefore, to the extent that this deep ecology is a coherent critique, it is certainly a radical one. Since Naess coined the term over thirty years ago, deep ecology has come to signify a particular school of radical environmental thought that holds more or less to those original principles. Deep ecologists believe in the possibility, the value, and the necessity of a sort of transcendental communion with the cosmos. Naess reports that

The ecological field-worker acquires a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. To the ecological field-worker, the equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom.<sup>8</sup>

Deep ecology celebrates wilderness as well as the wild, “non-rational” (as opposed to irrational) side of human nature.

Perhaps the most prominent, and embattled, aspect of deep ecology is its purported rejection of “anthropocentrism” in favor of “ecocentrism” or “biocentric egalitarianism.” Wilderness preservation as a goal irrespective of human interests is putatively central to deep ecology and can be traced back through Aldo Leopold and John

---

<sup>7</sup> See Naess, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Section II, axiom 2.

Muir to Thoreau, and, in some manner, to the romanticism they inherited. This unwavering call for the protection and active defense of wilderness “for its own sake” or because of its “intrinsic value” has, it must be admitted, resonated deeply in the minds of many, and has given deep ecology a fair share of sympathy from many academics and environmentalists. It has also given Earth First!, the self-proclaimed “action wing” of deep ecology, a ready stock of committed activists.

There are, however, important inconsistencies in the logic of the deep ecological wilderness philosophy, and these philosophical flaws have not escaped the notice of many critics. The critic who has commanded the most attention from the foremost vocal proponents of deep ecology is Murray Bookchin, around whom a no-less-radical critique, called “social ecology” was taking shape well before Naess’ popular lecture in 1972. Bookchin rejects anthropocentrism, as such. He has said “The word anthropocentrism doesn't frighten me. It implies that the natural world was "made for" human beings by some sort of deity. This, in my opinion, is absurd.”<sup>9</sup> However, Bookchin also recognized the fundamental nonsense of any notion of intrinsic value. In Bookchin’s understanding nothing has value until it is valued by some subject. If the notion of “intrinsic” value inherent in non-human nature does not depend on its being valued by some deity or universal cosmic subjectivity, then it must mean that non-human natural entities confer value on themselves. Bookchin rejects this latter possibility and asserts that humans are what give value to the rest of the world. He recounts,

One of my critics, Robyn Eckersley, challenged me in the journal *Environmental Ethics* to explain, "Why should human thinking be regarded more valuable than the

---

<sup>9</sup> Excerpted from “Interview with Murray Bookchin.” by David Vanek Harbinger: a journal of social ecology Vol. 2, No. 1

navigational skills of birds?" But that's just a silly question. In "navigating," birds are affected by the magnetic field of the Earth, they're affected by the changes of temperature; they're adapting to their surroundings. But human beings, crucially, can innovate, as I pointed out, and they live on another level of phenomena, culture. They can make airplanes, and they know how to navigate. Now they can go beyond birds and farther than birds and higher than birds.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, both Bookchin and the deep ecologists with whom he has been in conversation seem to be confused by what is probably a fundamentally incoherent debate. There is no logical basis to Bookchin's apparent assumption that a bird does not value itself, its young, its companions, or its world with a sentiment that penetrates to the core of its birdness just as humans might value such like things in their own life-worlds. But Bookchin's objections are justified in as much as the values that birds, or even ecosystems, may or may not confer on anything is not crucial for either Bookchin or the deep ecologists since their political critiques are engaged in the work of influencing the thinking and the actions of people, and not that of birds. If nature does have intrinsic value, it would hardly make much difference in the world if no humans valued that value.

The statement: "non-human nature has intrinsic value" is therefore simply a discursive power maneuver, which, if successfully instantiated in a discourse, can provide a basis for calling certain nature-regarding actions right, and other nature-destroying actions wrong. In the end, such a statement has no different meaning from the statement, "people should value non-human nature." Telling people to value plants or animals or landscapes, or disguising that commandment as a nonsensical objective statement about intrinsic value, does not seem likely to be very productive in accomplishing the goal of defending wild nature. Deep ecologists or anyone else who opposes the wanton

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

destruction of living things or landscapes will continue to assert their valuation of nature, but it is counterproductive to get mired down in trying to assert a factual, objective basis to what is simply a perfectly legitimate sentiment, on which, as it happens, the salvation of much of the living world may depend. If some people value the world in a deep and transcendental way, then most people probably have some capacity to do the same. If deep ecologists or anyone else believes that the biggest threat to that world is other people whose actions suggest that they don't value the world in that way (an entirely rational belief), then the principle question for them should be, "what explains the variation in the ways people conduct themselves with regard to non-human nature?" In consideration of this question it should be helpful to explore the history of the changing attitudes toward nature that accompany the rise of Western modernity.

### *Romanticism and "ecological consciousness"*

When the term "ecology" was first used by Earnst Haeckel in 1866, romanticism was already a fairly well established, if subaltern, aspect of Western cultural consciousness. Since roughly the closing of the American frontier in the 1890s the realization of limits to natural resources and the scientific understanding of the biophysical interconnection of living things have been intermingling with the romantic impulse, giving rise to many new critical discourses of various duration and coherence that are generally collectively referred to as the environmental movement.

The first major schism in Western thinking about environmental issues congealed in the debate between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot in which the grounding logic of

United States public lands policy was contested. Muir's position, which became known as "preservationism," was sustained by the romantic sentiment and argued for the preservation of wild nature for its own sake. Pinchot's position, called conservationism, argued for the prudent use of public lands and operated on the assertion that human benefit was the ultimate measure of the value of all non-human nature, and therefore the only reason for putting strictures on land use was so that human interests would be safeguarded. Both Muir and Pinchot had a fairly enlightened understanding of the principles of ecology as a science, and no doubt both foresaw that America's industrial society was, on its present path, becoming a threat to its own future. However, if Pinchot had any romantic proclivities, his politics did not. Muir valued wilderness, or nature, in a way that would never enter into Pinchot's conservationist vision.

The appreciation of wilderness, as such, has "grown" in the past several centuries, however, while Muir and Pinchot are convenient archetypes, it is not the case that there is one group of people who love wilderness "simply because it is" while another group is indifferent or seeks to exploit it for human ends. Rather, the romantic, or otherwise, appreciation for wilderness has developed in the general consciousness that almost all minds share to some degree through public discourse. However, as Roderick Nash observes, "friends of wilderness should remember that [...] they are riding the crest of a very recent wave."<sup>11</sup> Nash finds that "appreciation of wilderness began in the cities."<sup>12</sup> It seems that even as medieval city dwellers were finding that "city air makes one free," another curious sort of unfreedom was seeping to the surface of European consciousness. Renee de Chateaubriand would observe, "in vain does the imagination try to roam at

---

<sup>11</sup> Nash, 1973 p.xii

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.44

large amidst [Europe's] cultivated plains.”<sup>13</sup> Chateaubriand, like many of the European literati, would be drawn west of the American frontier, and would idealize this wilderness and the life of its native inhabitants, describing it in a language that was quite different from that used by the people for whom this wilderness was a home.<sup>14</sup>

Nash, following closely the work of Magorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: the Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite, stresses the religious roots of romanticism, showing how from the late medieval period to modernity, wilderness, which had long been associated with Satanic and demonic evils, came gradually to be associated with God instead. Nash notes that “the change in attitude began with the breakthroughs of European astronomy and physics that marked the beginning of the Enlightenment. As scientists revealed a universe that was at once vast, complex, and harmonious, they strengthened the belief that this majestic and marvelous creation had a divine source.”<sup>15</sup> Nash suggests that God essentially followed science into the wild, however the divine may have, in equal measure, been driven there by science. As the Western world enlightened itself, it began to embrace all fields of knowledge within a new metadiscourse of science,<sup>16</sup> just as the state was attempting to encapsulate its populations and geographic territories within disciplinary regime of surveillance and manipulation.<sup>17</sup> As empiricism and governmentality took control of the mysteries of the immediate realities of daily life, the great mystery of divinity seems to have been, in an

---

<sup>13</sup> Renee de Chateaubriand quoted in Nash, 1973 p. 49

<sup>14</sup> Compare, for example, the writings of Thoreau, Bartram, or Byrd with the narrative of John Tanner, an Anglo-American who was kidnapped by at a young age and spent the best part of his adult life in Native American Ojibbeway society, or with the language of Charles Eastman's “An Indian Boyhood.”

<sup>15</sup> Nash, 1973 p. 45

<sup>16</sup> See Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1979.

<sup>17</sup> See Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol I.

ironic twist of fate, expelled from the garden and into the wilderness, which yet remained a realm of the unknown.

In any case, the romantics followed Him there with notebook in hand, but their romantic depictions of nature may reveal as much about bourgeois society and the life of the subject of the 19<sup>th</sup> century disciplinary state, than about nature and the life of “savages,” noble or otherwise. Romantics, in their writings about wilderness, usually painted their own existence and their own subjectivity in negative space. They were drawn to the wild partly because it was a terrain that still escaped the grasp of what, especially to the leisured and learned, must have been felt as an increasingly totalitarian epistemic machinery of civilization. Wilderness had been juxtaposed to civilization in Western consciousness since antiquity as its dark and dangerous other, but it came into starker relief to civilization and into a more favorable light during this period not only because of the light science had begun to throw upon its wondrous complexity and harmony, but also because of the shadows that still fell over it. Romantics wished to “escape, in short, from the commonplace reality of the present” not only by going into the wilds, but by loosing themselves “in the shadowy grandeurs of the past,”<sup>18</sup> or into the dark reaches of the human mind explored by Poe and others. These were the remaining “places” where knowledge could be made by one’s self—where epistemic and political anarchy still prevailed and where “Man’s” truth was yet unfastened to the world. Romanticism, Nash offers, “implies an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious.”<sup>19</sup> Because wild nature was still all of these things it held forth the possibility for experiences that were not dominated by an external bloc of knowledge, or

---

<sup>18</sup> Washington Irving, *The Sketchbook*, Irving’s Works, Geoffrey Crayon edition (27 vols. New York, 1880) quoted in Nash, 1973 p. 72

<sup>19</sup> Nash, 1973 p. 47

regime of control. Wilderness was a space without “roads, towns, laws, and kings,”<sup>20</sup> beyond the frontier of science, “where the eye of god alone pervaded.”<sup>21</sup>

This anarchist vein of romanticism animates the thinking of many contemporary adventurers, wilderness enthusiasts, nature lovers, anarchists, new age spiritualists, and some environmentalists, who are, in large part, responding to an intensified version of this sort of experiential and epistemological domination. However, besides this “spiritually” repressive regime of knowledge and governance, most environmentalist thought is chiefly a response to the very grave anthropogenic threats to life in general and to the last tracts of unmodified wilderness. So the subjective longing for the anarchic realm of “nature” ironically helped give rise to call for a regime of governance to control the way humans dominate and control nature. For many environmentalists the contradictions of this solution lead to a good deal of philosophical conflict, and give rise to questions about the role of humans in “managing” nature and the status of humans as part of an embattled nature, answers to which are rarely surefooted or unequivocal.

As Nash points out,

There are two ways of thinking about the end of wilderness on earth. One might be termed the *wasteland scenario*. It anticipates a ravaged planet, one which is paved and poisoned to the point that the world dies with T.S. Eliot’s celebrated whimper [...] but the greatest long-term threat to the interests of people who covet the wild may reside in the *garden scenario*. It too ends wilderness, but beneficially rather than destructively.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Renee de Chateaubriand, quoted from *Recollections of Italy, England and America* (Philadelphia, 1816) in *ibid.* p. 49

<sup>21</sup> Charles Fenno Hoffman, *Winter in the West*, (2 vol. New York, 1835) pp. 193-94 quoted in *ibid.* p. 73

<sup>22</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, reprinted edition 1982), 380. Quoted in Bookchin and Foreman, 1991.

These two scenarios, though both may be implausible in the extreme forms in which they are here presented, represent two aspects of the sentiments of most environmentalists. The repulsiveness of the garden scenario stems from what may be called the anarchic sentiment (if a broad sense of “anarchic” is permitted, which rejects epistemic as well as political domination). The Mad Max-style wasteland scenario, on the other hand, is so unpalatable, not because it tyrannizes the imagination, but because it bespeaks so much death and irreversible destruction of the living world. The repulsiveness of the wasteland scenario stems from humanistic sentiments and, more generally, from an apparent human tendency to affiliate or identify with other forms of life—what E.O. Wilson called “biophilia.”

Many deep ecologists would probably claim that true one-ness with nature transcends such analytical categories. However, the “ecosophical,” cosmic, spiritual “identification” with an “intrinsically valuable” nature, which is professed by deep ecology, is characterized by a strong anarchic sentiment, and also clearly has a biophilic component. The temptation to misanthropy that dogs the *Tao* of deep ecology seems to stem not only from a biophilic abhorrence for human destructiveness, but also from an anarchic abhorrence for civilizations epistemically and governmentally rationalizing stranglehold on the outer world and on the self. Thus, deep ecology’s knack for outlawry and its emphasis on both the “wilderness out there,” and the “wilderness within.”

Besides the academic vocal front of deep ecology, there have been numerous other attempts to articulate the source of the ecological or biophilic conscience. On the one hand biophilia can be seen as something akin to sympathy or empathy, of the same quality, if not generally the same intensity, as humans show toward other humans. This

is almost certainly an aspect of it. It can be little other than sympathy that is invoked when images of baby seals are used to conduct a media-war against the commercial slaughter of pinnipeds. However the notion of a purely sympathetic basis for biophilia must be called into question when hunters express a biophilic attachment to their game, or when someone claims, as Aldo Leopold does, a deeply felt attachment to whole mountains or his “boyhood duck marsh.” Paul Shepard argues that there is a genetic predisposition for a sort of quasi-spiritualistic relationship between “tender [human] carnivores” and their “sacred game.” Leopold goes to the other end of history, arguing that ecology, as a qualitatively distinct scientific discipline fosters an “ecological consciousness.”<sup>23</sup>

Bookchin argues much the same point as Leopold, calling for an “ecological spiritual sensibility” which would “mean a decent, indeed, a wholesome sensitivity to nature and its subtle interconnections,” which he holds should be naturalist rather than supernaturalist.<sup>24</sup> The basis of Bookchin’s ecological ethics is elaborately argued in his book, The Ecology of Freedom. However, the value of Bookchin’s ecological thinking lies in the fact that he essentially shifts the focus of the debate in a more constructive direction. For Bookchin the important question is not so much, “what causes people to treat nature with care,” but rather, “what causes human society to recklessly and destructively dominate nature on such a great scale?” The greater problem, as Bookchin sees it, is that industrial society is structured in such a way that *any* truly environmental ethic is unlikely to be actualized on any meaningful scale, regardless of its basis.

---

<sup>23</sup> See Leopold, 1949. For an alternative interpretation of Leopold’s ethics, see Kalinowski, “Aldo Leopold as Hunter and Communitarian” in Vitek and Jackson (editors), 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Bookchin and Foreman, 1991 p. 36

*Murray Bookchin and the politics of social ecology*

For Bookchin, the increasingly obvious problematic relationship between humans and what is called the “environment” has its roots in problematic relationships between humans themselves—relationships that have emerged in our social, rather than strictly biological, evolution. In short, humanity dominates nature, because humans dominate other humans.

Bookchin’s political philosophy stems from the Hegelian dialectical tradition, and his acute sensitivity for social issues is informed by his personal and political experiences with European fascism. Disillusionment with state-run communism led Bookchin, as it did many other socialist intellectuals, toward a sort of post-Marxist, leftist anarchism, which follows in the tradition of anarchist social theorists and revolutionary figures such as Mikhail Bakunin or Peter Kropotkin.<sup>25</sup> Bookchin was a central figure in a brand of leftist anarchism arising in the sixties that was incorporating ecological concepts into its social critique. Bookchin and fellow self styled “eco-anarchists” or “social ecologists” have, he claims, “anchored ecological problems for the first time in hierarchy”<sup>26</sup> rather than in economic classes or in blanket claims about the destructiveness of “humanity.” The social anarchism of Bookchin really bears only passing resemblance to the anarchist tendencies of deep ecology. The anarchism of deep ecology is based in the much more individualistic, introspective, non-rational, and reactionary aspects of enlightenment-era romanticism. The anarchism of social ecology is based on more extroverted, and social, aspects of *fin de siecle* socialistic revolutionary political doctrines focusing on mutual aid

---

<sup>25</sup> For representative samples of the revolutionary political thought of these two Russian anarchists see Bakunin, 1916 and Kropotkin, 1914.

<sup>26</sup> Bookchin, 1989 p. 155

and communal freedom. Still it is significant that social ecology and deep ecology converge on some level in basic agreement with Thoreau when he claims, “That government is best which governs not at all.”<sup>27</sup>

Probably out of a prudent desire to distance himself from myopically individualistic, right-wing libertarians and unthinking, reactionary, chaos-coveting, nihilistic children of suburbia, Bookchin rarely talks of anarchism in unqualified terms, focusing instead on principles of confederalism, equality, mutual aid, and direct democracy. Differences with the going Marxism of the thirties, forties, and fifties led him “to a leftism much more in keeping with the North American revolutionary tradition.”<sup>28</sup> He sees an unrealized revolutionary potential in the now obscured civic republican tradition within American political thought. “Think for a moment what would have happened in this country” Bookchin suggests,

if the town-meeting conception of democracy had been fostered as against the aristocratic proclivities for hierarchy; if individualism had become an ethical ideal instead of congealing into a sick proprietarian egotism; if the U.S. republic had been slowly reworked into a confederal democracy, if capital concentration had been inhibited by cooperatives and small worker-controlled enterprises, and if the middle classes had been joined to the working classes in a genuine people’s movement such as the Populists tried to achieve.<sup>29</sup>

Bookchin rejects the Marxist teleological vision of history, and therefore has no faith in the inevitability of a total overthrow of the existing order of global political economy. Marx’s vision of historical development “was to remove its essential element

---

<sup>27</sup> From the opening paragraph of Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience

<sup>28</sup> Bookchin and Foreman, 1991 p. 55-56

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 55-56

of spontaneity.”<sup>30</sup> Just as American society could have taken different turns at the founding period or during the Populist movement, for Bookchin the future is a field of possibility, and never an inevitability. While Bookchin makes no pretense of dogmatic faith, he certainly believes that society currently houses deep contradictions that carry vital potentials for change. Despite Francis Fukuyama’s assurances of living neo-liberally ever after,<sup>31</sup> recent trends in world political movements suggest Bookchin’s beliefs are not unfounded. Rather than being the deathblow to any political alternative, the decline the false otherness of state-communism, could perhaps bring the inconsistencies and schizophrenias of neo-liberal politics into sharper focus.

*The inescapable sociality of state capitalism*

Today, wherever the global marketplace of services, ideas, knowledge, goods, and interests extends, values of efficiency, productivity, “growth,” and “performativity”<sup>32</sup> are privileged. However the primacy this set of supposedly neutral values is regularly being critically reexamined (to put it euphemistically). As the people of Flint, Michigan; Chiapas, Mexico; and many other less-publicized loci of contention can attest, fast capitalism blithely dictates that the actions of the socially unencumbered rich, the judgments of corporate amalgamations of disembodied self-interests, and the prescriptions of technocratic elites are to be accepted in place of a consciously and deliberately formulated vision of the public good. At the heterogeneous sites of struggle where the contradictions of liberal, capitalism are most keenly felt, people are

---

<sup>30</sup> Bookchin, 1989 p. 134

<sup>31</sup> See Fukuyama, 1992

<sup>32</sup> This term is used by Jean Francois Lyotard in [The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge](#).

consistently driven to question many aspects of “Development” and “Progress.” Hard lessons in disillusionment inevitably lead many to wonder why they should be *treated* as clients and consumers instead of manifesting their own identities as community members, tribes-people, or citizens?

The rhetoric of public officials suggests that many still believe that at their best they are constitutive members of living communities that have pasts to be honored and possibilities to be realized. Apparently people have a sense that in their better moments people are more than modernized “optimal foragers;” they are bearers of human histories, cultivators of cultural heritages, stewards of shared futures, ephemeral yet vital agents in a public world. But within the nexuses of power that presently infiltrate communities and transect biographies, many human potentials come to no avail, and thus certain forms of self-conception seem more and more anachronistic. Therefore, in most of the “developed” spaces of the world, socio-political passivity, individualistic isolationism, and effective ecological indifference are well entrenched.

The functional logic of the developed world operationalizes the geographical places where people everywhere live as stocks of inert resources fit to be measured by dollars, exchanged on markets, managed by governments, defended from abstract threats by mercenaries, and developed by capital. Citizens can therefore rationally embrace the notion that they are nothing more than self-interested consumers living on a more or less scenic pile of human and natural resources. In the United States this is somewhat remarkable given that this country’s historical self-conception is shot through with robustly civic values.

From an objective standpoint, however, it is questionable whether this modern condition stems from a human nature that has been uncovered or one that has been manufactured. A very different perspective prevails, for example, among the people inhabiting the Narmada river valley in India who have reportedly committed to drowning themselves in the imminent event of the centrally planned flooding of the basin<sup>33</sup>, or for the citizen of ancient Athens, who saw his *polis* as the realm in which the good life was possible, excellence was achievable, and mortality was bearable.<sup>34</sup> Indeed it seems the instrumental logic of modernity is an option rather than an inevitability, yet any alternative logics to which everyday citizens may be vaguely drawn often find no forceful or constructive expression in society, so, at length, they are systematically abandoned.

The revival of such alternative logics and other values, according to some voices of the New Left, now presents itself as a point of convergence across various manifestations of political resistance.<sup>35</sup> It is also an ecological imperative according to the many environmentalists' critiques, from the mainstream to the most radical formulations of social or deep ecology, which argue that averting apocalypse requires "thinking globally" or "acting locally" on the basis of a new environmental ethic that would not only demand environmental justice for one's bioregional neighbors but would even consider the "seventh generation," or "honor Mother Earth." Although the easy-to-remember dictums have been handed down from the moral high-ground, humanity has gone about its business of development in much the same ecologically unsustainable

---

<sup>33</sup> See Patricia Adams' Property Rights and Bioregionalism, (1994) a publication of the Cato Insitute at [http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy\\_report/prop-pr.html](http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy_report/prop-pr.html)

<sup>34</sup> See Bookchin, 1992 p. 58-62

<sup>35</sup> Hardt and Negre, Empire is only the most sensational argument suggesting that new forms of collaboration are possible among the many different types of resistance to the economically driven agenda of globalization.

manner. This suggests that a “new environmental ethic,” created by some people and then communicated to others, even if people “adopt” it or are convinced of it due to its acceptable normative stance and its force of logic, may still fall short of the mark. A change in actual human comportment toward environments will probably depend, as Bookchin has relentlessly argued, on the popular critique and subsequent remaking, whether revolutionary or piecemeal, of those aspects of modern society that give play to certain kinds of interests, values, and logics while inhibiting or encumbering others.

Ulrich Beck, as one among many theorists who are interested in the sociological aspects of environmental issues, contributes an analysis of modernity that can help inform such a popular critique. As Beck observes, modernized individuals have been essentially released from traditional class-based, feudal, tribal, or even familial social moorings as “the place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in the consciousness.”<sup>36</sup> The ‘emancipation’ of the individual in modernized societies entails inadvertently the stripping away of traditional source materials of identity construction, the replacement of which has been taken up in the information age by the institutions of the military industrial complex *cum* popular culture. In such a milieu, social life can no longer be said to have a separate existence from the realm of economic and governmental institutions. Rather, it is regularly, comprehensively, and intimately informed by them. Indeed these institutions have begun to constitute themselves as the very fabric of sociality. “The private sphere is not what it appears to be: a sphere separated from the

---

<sup>36</sup> Beck, 1992 p. 131

environment. It is the outside turned inside and made private...<sup>37</sup> Rather than being guided by obligatory, trans-generational values of tribal, feudal, and quasi-feudal social groups, based in faith, tradition, or blood ties, these institutions are driven by the capitalistic imperatives of corporate profit and exponential economic growth. This hollowing out and re-colonization of social existence, together with the decoupling of the internalized goods and externalized bads of industrial production, works to obviate any sense of extra-personal responsibility as it simultaneously tends to commodify all avenues to personal fulfillment. Thus masses of potentially reasonable people are prepared to dedicate their waking hours to work that is meaningless to them, largely out of a pathological need to glut themselves beyond all necessity on the earth's materials and energies.

Even if some governmental actors would like to seek different ends, it is always in the interest of the state to shore up these relations of production and consumption since only by these measures can it ensure state revenues, which depend on the circulation of an ever-greater abundance of needful things. Thus the short-term, individualistic logic of the market (which pervades not only the economic arena, but also politics in large scale representative democracies) tends to become a totalizing political and cultural force, which frustrates any significant attempt to “alter the social construction of nature in relation to society, making nature into a subject, not an object; an agency, not an instrumentality, and a more than equal partner, not a dominated subaltern force.”<sup>38</sup> Capitalism, not as merely a qualitatively specific mode of economic interaction, but as ‘a World,’ as a totalizing form of social organization aligned with state interest, and

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 133

<sup>38</sup> Luke, 1999 p. 23

otherwise unfettered in scope and scale, is a force that militates against any more deliberate configurations or reconfigurations of social ecologies. This can be observed not only where traditional economies are supplanted by the ‘efficiencies’ of state-sanctioned capitalist enterprises,<sup>39</sup> but also in the already developed world where waste is still the first principle of political economy despite a general understanding that the situation is collectively maladaptive.<sup>40</sup> For these reasons Bookchin and many other environmentalists are astute in their suspicion that ecological problems are best understood as particular symptoms, among others, of a problematic system of political economy structured to ensure the hegemony of a short term, narrowly economic valuation system.<sup>41</sup> Thus the best hope for supplanting destructive patterns of hyper-consumption and accelerating resource exploitation, which most acknowledge are at the root of many environmental problems, lies in resistance to this system of power formations that continues to strip the human soil and prepare the cultural seedbed for an exponentially growing economy, which quite logically has its endpoint in an ecological crisis.

---

<sup>39</sup> See Scott, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Marcuse’s critique of “the waste economy” in One Dimensional Man is still perhaps the best. Capitalist production, as its proponents point out, is indeed efficient, but efficiency implies an end. And what that end is becomes the issue. Even the most efficient methods of manufacturing a two story inflatable Gumby®, amount to a wasteful endeavor in almost any possible circumstances.

<sup>41</sup> For a few of the many arguments to this effect see Costanza *et al.*, 2000; Sagoff, 1988, Bookchin, 1989; Kemmis 1990. See also Nyborg, 2000. for a study of socio-economic behavior related to environmental ethics.

*Challenges and opportunities for self-government in the context of environmental crisis*

As Benjamin Barber argues, such resistance to the pet values of state-capitalism increasingly takes the form of xenophobic tribalism or religious fundamentalism.<sup>42</sup> Many within the environmental movement believe that dethroning economic values without forsaking the arguably still unrealized hope for democracy and freedom, and without resorting to the destructive passion of holy war, is achievable through decentralized forms of self-governance wherein many actions and judgments would be exhumed from the technocratic “subpolitical” arena, elucidated within public spheres, and subjected to intensive forms of local, democratic deliberation. Bookchin’s thinking converges along these lines with the environmental theory of Charles Foster, Daniel Kemmis, Arne Naess, Kirkpatrick Sale, Gary Snyder, Andrew Szasz, and Theodore Roszak, among many others. While social ecologists and eco-anarchists have clear phylogenetic ties to the New Left, there are also emerging possibilities for potent collaborations with populist strains of the Right. Particularly in the United States, place-based struggles against external political and economic forces of development increasingly tend to forge alliances between environmental activists, loggers, ranchers, and other citizens of many decidedly red states.<sup>43</sup> Such purportedly “unlikely” developments lend credibility to those elements of the environmental movement which suggest radically reconfiguring political and

---

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the political pitfalls inherent in many forms of protest against “McWorld,” see Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld*.

<sup>43</sup> See Daniel Kemmis (1990) for a discussion of the hopeful possibilities for such an alliance. For two among many examples, see Billings Gazette, Feb 18, 2001, [Coal Bed Methane, Montana Watches as Wyoming Collapses](#) by Jeff Tollefson; Christian Science Monitor, Oct 29, 2003, [Rare Sight: Ranchers and Farmers Join to Save a Bird](#) by Todd Wilkinson.

economic structures to empower locally situated populations to become more autonomous agents in the stewardship of their local environments.

Still, many would argue that direct democracy and political decentralization as an environmental solution rests on a shaky foundation. It is subject to all of the criticisms leveled against Thomas Jefferson and his Republicans by the Madisonian Federalists during the American founding.<sup>44</sup> Only now, the faith in “civic virtue” may seem even more tenuous when citizens are expected to put their own interests aside in the public arena, not only for their fellow citizens, but also for the good of “the environment.” However, while ecological concerns can be seen as an additional challenge to the viability of a decentralized, autonomist, democratic politics, this may be a hasty conclusion. The imperatives of defending local environments from external economic and political forces may in fact serve to shore up civic or ethical ties between individuals, their communities and their local biomes. Direct environmental political practice at a regional level, as an epistemologically, socially, and morally demanding way of engaging and interacting with an immediate landscape, could be, for most people, a more effective means of connecting with nature than communing with tree spirits or skiing in the back-country.

The obstacles to such possibilities for civic, environmental self-governance, therefore, manifest not only on the level of public policy, but also on the level of the consciousness of the human subject. People are not simply constrained in the expression of their subjectivity by socio-economic systems, but also, as Michel Foucault says, are actively constituted as subjects through practices in which the human subject is objectified by that self-same human subject by positioning himself within the discourses

---

<sup>44</sup> This debate will be explored further in chapter four.

used to make sense of his interaction with the world. Where Foucault was famously concerned with the production of the self, the matter of concern for those who wish to explore forms of “environmental” consciousness, has been how the world is produced in consciousness by the person —how the outside world, especially the “natural” world, is represented in the mind of the thinking subject.

At first blush these two concerns may pretend to be separate, however the common sense suspicion that these issues are in fact identical or at least inextricable from one another, is validated by developments in the field of anthropology. According to Tim Ingold, the subject/world dichotomy that informed cognitive and social anthropology for most of the last century suggests that the subject “must perforce construct the world, in consciousness, before they can act in it.”<sup>45</sup> It is also easy to apply the same precepts to Foucauldian notions of the self, seeing the epistemological appropriation and self-critical maintenance of the self as something that happens in cognitive exercises—in episodes separated or abstracted from the mundane practices of inhabiting the world, in which practices this constructed self is then brought to bear upon that world. Ingold contrasts such a “building perspective” with recent arguments made by “advocates of ‘practice theory’, who argue that cultural knowledge, rather than being imported into the settings of practical activity, is constituted within these settings through the development of specific dispositions and sensibilities that lead people to orient themselves in relation to their environment, and to attend to its features in the particular ways that they do.”<sup>46</sup> Taking a cue from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Ingold suggests dissolving the approach of beginning with the subject, and then bringing its decided

---

<sup>45</sup> Ingold p. 154

<sup>46</sup> Ibid p. 154

qualities to bear on a the world. “From a phenomenological standpoint [...] the world emerges with its properties alongside the emergence of the perceiver in person, against the background of involved activity. Since the person is a being-in-the-world, the coming-into-being of the person is part and parcel of the coming-into-being of the world.”<sup>47</sup> Any conception of the outer world must surely have its compliment in a conception of the self, though it probably does not need to be consciously formulated as such. Likewise any conception of the self would seem impossible without a conception of an outer environment in which the self is manifested. No doubt, if they are to be conceptually separated at all, each is, in all its nuance, contingent upon the other. As Ingold suggests, “self and world merge in the activity of dwelling”, which, it seems, is both expressive and formative of a conception of being-in-the-world.

It is therefore important to understand that Foucault’s “technologies of the self” are always only one dimension, though a particularly conscious dimension, of the ongoing production of human subjectivity. Foucault takes from Habermas three other “matri[ces] of practical reason:” “technologies of production,” “technologies of sign systems,” and “technologies of power.”<sup>48</sup> Foucault adds, “these four types of technologies hardly ever function separately, though each is associated with a certain type of domination.”<sup>49</sup> The potential for changing the way people relate to many aspects of the other-than human world surrounding them depends upon understanding how the conception of being-in-the-world has been actualized through tenuously stabilized flows of power that are simultaneously involved in relations of production, increasingly semiotic, and still autogenic, as with Foucault’s techniques-of-the-self. These configured

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.168

<sup>48</sup> Martin et al., 1988 p. 18

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 18

fluidities of power are instantiated in the life processes of knowing, judging, acting and reacting in environments—that is, in the subjective ecologies of people.

An analysis of everyday ecologies will require essentially loosening the term “environment” from where it is rather firmly situated in many environmental discourses. In contemporary “green” thought “the concept of the environment rarely captures the whole quality or entire quantity of human beings’ interrelations with all the terrains, water, climates, soils, architectures, technologies, societies, economies, cultures or states surrounding them.”<sup>50</sup> Environmentalists have grave and good reasons for concentrating on the green spectrum of the human environment, but looking also into the increasingly architecturally and epistemologically pre-constructed environments that environ modern humans will help illuminate the subjective human ecologies that manifest within them. I am suggesting that it is in this actual, specific worldly immersion of the person as an actively dwelling, meaning-making being-in-the-world that particular forms of consciousness take root as much as in the inheritance of Cartesian dualisms or Abrahamic anthropocentrism.

---

<sup>50</sup> Luke, 1999 p. 126

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **An Abstract Ecology and its Vectors: Risk, Science, Cartography, and Urbanization**

This chapter attempts to pull together some cultural or sociological analyses that outline the particular forms that subjective “ecologies” take, or the patterns that inhere in them, in modern Western society. The word “ecology” carries its general conceptual meaning of dealing with dynamic ins and outs of some particularity relative to its environment, but here it is applied in a sense perhaps closer to Gregory Bateson’s notion of an “ecology of mind” or James Gibson’s “ecological psychology” than to the natural scientific notion of physical ecology of an organism.<sup>51</sup> I use the term “ecology” to refer to the whole complex of a person’s subjective worldly interactions, which is to be made sense of by distinguishing the patterns that inhere it. This enables an analysis of particular modes of person-world interaction characteristic of modern society.

---

<sup>51</sup> For an understanding of Bateson’s and Gibson’s approaches to cultural anthropology, see Bateson, 1979; Bateson, 1972; Gibson, 1979; Heft, 2001; Reed 1996; and Ingold, 2000

*The concept of a subjective ecology*

To inquire about what I propose to call the ecology of the human subject means investigating those aspects of ordinary life-practices that fall under the category of “inhabitation.” But inhabitation must be taken to mean something more than simply the sessile occupation of an abode. It means something more like experiencing and acting within the materials and the forces arrayed around the person, particularly as those interactions bear upon life itself and its everyday maintenance and advancement.

Inhabitation, or dwelling, is a condition that is at once ontological, epistemological, and agentic. For an organism recognized as a “thing,” which “exists,” being is inseparable from dwelling. Dwelling, moreover, is the ontology *specific to organisms*. Also dwelling or inhabiting, as something only organisms can do, implies agency or activity, even if it is of the most rudimentary and automatic kind. Even an amoeba acts on its own behalf—attempts to better its lot—by going toward anything that is food, and away from everything else. This agentic comportment, in turn, requires at least a rudimentary epistemology. Amoebae would need to know “food” at least by some criteria sufficient to structure a binary world. At the level of relatively self-conscious organisms such as humans and other higher-order chordates, it is safe to say that not only does agency come to require knowing, but knowing, or conceptualizing one’s world, comes about in the process of incorporating its components into a pattern of agentic action.<sup>52</sup> Thus, for a living organism, existence entails actively knowing, and knowingly acting in a hazardous, but ultimately life-giving milieu—in a life-world, and this, it

---

<sup>52</sup> See Tim Ingold, 2000, for an elaboration of a “dwelling perspective” as it relates to cultural anthropology.

seems, is the best definition of “inhabiting.” The patterns or the logic that inheres in an organism’s inhabitational activities, furthermore, can be properly called that organism’s ecology. Furthermore it is through an ecology, or a mode of inhabiting, that a habitat is revealed to the organism. Or, in the case of humans, as anthropologist Tim Ingold says, the “manifold constituents [of the world] take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity.”<sup>53</sup>

What, then, has become of the human habitat? What is the theatre of this or that person’s agency and knowledge? How has its character changed as part of the historical developments of civilization? How does the world present itself—make itself known to, and felt by—the person? What forms does it take, this agonistic arena arrayed with life-giving and hazardous things, before the faculties of the person? Where does it recede, where does it advance? Where is it distilled, where abstracted, where mediated, and where obscured? And as socio-technological systems have simultaneously changed human surroundings and ways of incorporating them into life activities, what patterns or logics have emerged in the ways people perceive and interact with these environments?

Such questions seem to suggest an unbounded inquiry. Could every critique of society and every analysis of every aspect of civilization not be enveloped in such broadly suggestive questions? True, all of history could be rewritten from a subjective “ecological” perspective. All that is and has been could be told as a story of humans and their interactions with surroundings—and conceivably very little insight would be forthcoming. But this objection is only to say that this approach is just one more perspective from which to categorize historical phenomena. Its communicative utility depends upon its intelligent application. In the present political context in which

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 153

ecological dynamics have become social problems and the technical has become political, an analysis of everyday life is needed which concentrates specifically on human interaction not with other people per se, but with non-human elements of the life-world—with objects, mediums, substances, living things, spaces, landscapes, terrains, etc.—even if, or rather precisely because, such intercourse is part and parcel of social relations between people. So while taking the subjective ecology of the person as an object of investigation may seem to be a dauntingly totalizing project, it may also make it possible to synergize many insightful critiques to underscore systemic changes in human relationships to the physical. In an attempt to elucidate the possibility of such changes, I here explore sociological treatments of science, risk, mapping, and urbanization to facilitate an understanding of these conventions and institutions as technologies for mediating the perception and active incorporation of the materiality of the life-world by human subjects. Ulrich Beck's sociological analysis of the perception of risk provides an appropriate point of departure for this discussion.

*Ulrich Beck, the political epistemology of risk*

In Risk Society, Beck develops an overarching theme of “reflexive modernity,” which deconstructs the notion of Modernity as a rational steady-state of society and reveals it as a phase of history interwoven with a complex of social forces that have turned in upon themselves. The categories on which industrial society bases the logics that order its energies—binaries such as nature and culture, private and public, self and other—are being deconstructed by the social, technological, and physio-chemical

byproducts of the industrial system. Thus modernity must be seen as a reflexively fluctuating set of forces rather than an “end of history.”

As part of this theme Beck has made an important distinction between the politics and sociology of a society based on the struggle against scarcity and that of a society in which the primary struggles take place with respect to socially produced risk. This transition from class society, based on the distribution of wealth, to “risk society,” Beck notes, is coeval with the “historical falsification” of the nature/culture dichotomy. In other words, when “nature” becomes a domain of human produced risk (i.e. Acid rain, poisoned soils, “introduced” exotic pests, engineered organisms, polluted waters, and radioactive substances) the classical conception of nature as society’s other is eclipsed. Nature ceases, on some level, to be a realm of scarcity. It no longer appears as a wild agency, other to civilization, which more than anything withholds the goods. Instead nature becomes a social vector through which humans subject other humans to active affliction. Nature is thus less a space of paucity that conceals all the goods than a realm of a perilous plenitude—a provident proxy of humanity that houses many bads.

This suggests that the “environment” is perhaps not only the “natural world” nor really should it be understood as both nature and society. Rather environments are homogenizations that make a mockery of any such distinction. Thus, for environmentalists to speak in terms of resurrecting “nature” may be counterproductive if not impossible. What is needed is a critique of the means by which this homogenized world is known, judged, incorporated, and acted in by the human subject. Beck advances such a “post-naturalist” critique of the politics and sociology of science, which can be read as an exposition of a critical aspect of a qualitatively new mode of interaction

between people and their surroundings. The social epistemological machinery of science with its quantification of environmental (in the broadest sense of that adjective) danger has become a heavily trafficked byway between perception and conception, and between actions and reactions. By speaking of this “byway” as an element, aspect, or vector of a human ecology, I intend only to reveal it in specifically this capacity, in its mediating capacity.

The “ecology” of the subject of Beck’s “risk society,” which is structured by, or rather composed of, these mediating conduits, is characterized, above all else, by the abstraction and sublation of the physical, the experiential, or the sensual. Firmly lodged in the contemporary scientific consciousness, Beck states, is a vision of the world as a realm of “imperceptible, yet omnipresent latent causality. Dangerous, hostile substances lie concealed behind the harmless facades.” For scientifically enlightened people, “everything must be viewed with a double gaze, and can only be correctly understood and judged through this doubling. The world of the visible must be investigated, relativized and evaluated with respect to a second reality, only existent in thought and yet concealed in the world.”<sup>54</sup>

Beck describes a society wherein the world as it is experienced loses meaning in proportion to the degree that its experiencers are informed, and educated as to the true natures and significances of things by science. Through the lens of science and its commercial applications, as Beck points out, people in their personal experience have come to inhabit a world of things that they do not understand and processes in which they are incompetent to intervene. Invisible creatures cause infections, and all types of creeping death lurk around in undetectable things. Smog warnings, not our eyes and

---

<sup>54</sup> Beck, 1992 p. 72

noses, tell us when the air is safe to breathe. State fisheries biologists, rather than knowledge of what's going on upstream, tell the public which waters to fish from. And science, not local knowledge, defines thresholds of toleration for dangerous substances.

We might say that danger, when it is formally quantified as a probability and distributed as public knowledge, becomes “risk” in the sense Beck intends. As such, risks are imperceptible truths about the world, knowable only through bureaucratic accumulations of data and their subsequent treatment by the proper computations. The risks that attend everyday activities and interactions with built and unbuilt environments are like the “true natures” of substances and systems that are revealed to society by a scientific vanguard. Risks are largely an informational sort of knowledge that “come to consciousness through scientized thought, and cannot be directly related to primary experience.”<sup>55</sup>

But why talk of risk as an aspect of the ecology of modern humans? An organism's ecology is supposed to be the “logic”, the pattern, or the tendencies, that consists in the totality of that organism's interactions with its “environment”—that is, with all the material stuff through which it passes, and which passes through it, surrounds it, and becomes part of it. Risks, of course, are abstract concepts and not of material substance. However, risks are a part of the human ecology in so far as they are conceptual constructs that order or affect people's interactions with their surroundings. When one's perception of the environment is informed by notions of risk, one acts on that environment differently than one otherwise would. Thus, in the modern world informationalized scientific knowledge has become a defining feature of the human ecology.

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 52

“Water quality” provides a suitable example for illustrating this point. For most people of the developed world, water is generally conceived of as either potable, or non-potable. Potable water comes out of taps or, increasingly, bottles, and all other water is generally lumped into the non-potable category whether it’s in the washing machine, the creek, or the gutter. Water, therefore, is judged on the basis of very simple criteria by most people. Water authorities provide a sort of binary code for good water or bad water—sanctioned water or unsanctioned water. The consumer of water therefore imagines herself as being generally incompetent to judge water based on its perceptible qualities. Water, like most of the rest of a person’s environment, is imagined as the risky domain of other people’s, or other things,’ knowledge and action. It does not seem strange, for example, to drink cloudy, offensively over-chlorinated water from the tap and to go thirsty beside a clear spring of unsanctioned, “risky” water. Thus one finds backpackers, festooned with high-tech gadgetry they hardly understand, filtering the purest water to extract the imaginary microscopic danger from it, even in their own biotic backyards.

Environmental risks from toxic substances, solar rays, radiation, carcinogens, and other threats, as Beck notes, are both real and unreal at once. They are abstractions to be sure, but as abstractions they refer to particularities, and they structure the way people act in the world, affecting, in turn, the environment’s actions on people, and thus becoming an element of the increasingly anaesthetized ecology of modern life. When the human environment is conceptualized as a domain of “risk,” or when it is apprehended by modern minds conditioned by the scientific information economy, a person’s actions tend to conform to platitudes, policies, rules, formulas, and prescriptions of other knowledge

makers rather than to a sensual or aesthetic mode of discernment of the immediate situation.

As the dynamics of the world are more and more informationalized as quantifiable probabilities, the environment seems more and more dauntingly illegible to the person, and one's everyday actions in it, and its actions on oneself, seem less and less meaningful. In the conceptualization of risk the individual person is subsumed by the typical subject, and the individual instance of some interaction is subsumed by the typical instance. When environments are conceived of through this discourse of risk, the subject situates her self in the position of endangerment largely beyond the powers of her estimation or control. The conceiver is therefore already in the process of subtracting her agency in her own mind, and subordinating the immediate experience, or the lived reality, to the abstraction of the typical instance.

To better one's lot in a world of scarcity means basically asserting oneself more or less directly against a stingy nature. The struggle for existence in risk society, on the other hand, engages the person with a cornucopian world that must pass through "the machine" to be assessed, judged, filtered, and standardized by the statistician's black box. Thus individual instances of worldly contact are overlaid with an informational user-interface before they are ready to be experienced. The person is abstracted out of the authentic immediacy of whatever is occurring and reduced to the non-agent, a supine predicate object—the "norm." As Beck says, the fact that environmental risks are fundamentally intangible, "gives their suspected mischief almost unlimited space."<sup>56</sup> This fear of the invisible in turn gives an almost unlimited space to the solicitations and manipulations of government agencies, research institutes, environmental world-

---

<sup>56</sup> Beck, 1992 p. 73

watchers, meteorologists, and purveyors of risk-mitigating products and knowledges on which populations depend for the interpretation of this hazardous world. Not only does such dependency limit the cultural capacity for self-government by keeping people in fear of their own incompetence to protect themselves from their environment, but it also and at the same time interrupts the aesthetic relationship between people and their world.

*The evolving cultural profile of science*

Some important questions arise at this point. How real is the distinction sketched here? How completely is it manifested in everyday life, and in what aspects of it? And what are the ramifications of this abstract ecology? If the distinction is real it should be possible to bring into relief qualitatively different ways of interacting with environments. The alternative to the “risky” environment would be an environment comprehended and judged on the basis of ongoing experiential interactions with it rather than through the calculations of more or less external agents of knowledge production.

The mode of interaction that prevailed two centuries ago, even among “men of science” was quite different from the ecology of the modern consumer. For example, when Lewis and Clark’s so-called Corps of Discovery was plagued with boils and dysentery on their transcontinental trek, the captains suggested that the men take their drinking water from further under the surface of the Missouri river. Their understanding of the disease-causing agent, based on the simplistic notion that the water was too “muddy,” was incomplete in a modern scientific sense. Nonetheless, this ascertainment was effective. The waters of the Missouri, to Lewis, and even to his men, though perhaps

interpreted in a proto-scientific style, was a *legible* domain, and in their interactions with it they operated as active agents responding to a wide array of its perceptible and immediate qualities.

In one of his more non-fictional works, Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain laments that the beauty, or the “rapture,” of the Mississippi River was lost on a river-boat captain.

Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river!<sup>57</sup>

Twain’s whimsical musing in fact broaches a very real question about the subjective human ecology, and his anecdote from the perspective of a boatman provides a valuable metaphor. However, a familiarity with the balance of Twain’s writings leads one to suspect that he has here neglected another side of the story.

If the “grace, beauty, and poetry” is suffocated in the eye of the practiced river-boatman, what is this “majesty” that remains? Is the captain’s relationship to the river not far more, and more completely, aesthetically charged than that of most of his passengers whose idle wonderment at the waters is bounded by the ignorance, disengagement, and helplessness of clients? The river beheld by the riverboat captain is infinitely more than a visual aesthetic tableau. For the boatman, the river is an intimately known sort of habitat, a “home turf.” It is the exquisitely complex theatre of his operations, of his excellence and his failures, whose every subtle detail is infused with

---

<sup>57</sup> This passage is taken from chapter Nine of Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi.

layer upon layer of meaning. Perhaps the “beauty” of the river *is* somewhat lost on the captain, but this is because beauty, as such, can only gesture pitifully toward what the river truly *is* to a boatman, or what hunting grounds and the “sacred game” *are* to the “tender carnivore.”<sup>58</sup>

Does the boatman, when he’s on the river, share something, an ecology perhaps, with those who were scientists when science was itself fresh? In its infancy, science was a philosophical comportment, rather than a specialized technical practice. It is no coincidence that science was very fashionable at that time. The scientist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was seen as a worldly philosopher—still undisciplined and unspecialized, a sort of an intellectual renaissance man whose access to truth was as direct as the protestants access to God. He was a generalist, the “universal man” to whom the civic republican tradition entrusted democracy, freedom, and justice. Science, as a worldly philosophical project, was considered a worthy, even indispensable pursuit for respectable members of society. The practice of science is looked upon differently in contemporary society. In the views of many people, science has become the domain of “nerds” whose unworldliness is their very hallmark. When and how this peculiar shift occurred is beyond the scope of this paper to explore, but it is important to note that scientific rationality in and of itself is not necessarily at issue. At issue are the cultural effects of the institution that Science has become—namely, a social machinery which produces knowledge and judgments behind the scenes and largely in accordance with the imperatives of profits and power, or “performativity.”

---

<sup>58</sup> See Shepard, 1973, for an exploration of the ethics and aesthetics of the “cynegetic” pre-history of humans.

It seems as though a few humans threw off the religious yoke of epistemic dependency for a fleeting moment only to assume new blinders and take their place in the traces of another master's chariot. This time "Man" is the driver. As Beck concludes, a new "dark age" seems to have dawned wherein "everyday thought and imagination [is] *removed from its moorings in the world of the visible* [...] we are no longer concerned with the specific value of that which appears to us in perception. What becomes the subject of controversy as to its degree of reality is instead what everyday consciousness does *not* see, and *cannot perceive*: radioactivity, pollutants and threats in the future."<sup>59</sup> Thresholds, warnings, invisible threats, professional prescriptions, and informationalized qualities—these things, just like trees, sunshine, lampposts, and brick walls, act as materials and forces intimated into the terrains modernized people navigate. Modern humans are gradually learning what it is to be environed by abstractions, and to exist within an ecology of signs and simulacra where the "real" is transported to a shadow kingdom, and the sensual and immediate become illusory facades and non-events.

It is important to note that while that which Beck calls "risk consciousness" shows signs of advancement, there may also be signs of its recession. More and more of the substances and activities incorporated into modern life carry with them the laboratory's accumulated quantified information, however, in the face of an ever increasing flow of contradictory "findings" about carcinogens, environmental hazards, dietary perfection, and the shortest path to carnal salvation, there may also be a trend toward incredulity and exasperation such that many people are thrown back on a sort of locally produced knowledge or a sort of "folk science." Such home-grown knowledge is by no means tantamount to ignorance; it can carry the full force of a trust in the five

---

<sup>59</sup> Beck, 1992 p.73

senses, and a form of post-industrial common sense, which comes from the accumulated modern experience, not of lab technicians but of regular people. Such common sense owes a debt to science, but may have outgrown a disingenuous dependence upon its technocrat spokesmen. It is unlikely that in the foreseeable future, people will return to an assumption that noxious industrial waste or spent plutonium fuel rods are benign wonders of a brave new world. A certain hard won skepticism toward industrial activity is probably here to stay. It is local knowledge of this kind that prompts citizens to reject biotechnology labs in their communities, not because they are sure that it is dangerous, but because the stakes are too high. This sort of common sense might reasonably be depended upon to avert certain idiocies of industry, such as the mad cow epidemic, which most agricultural experts now agree was caused by feeding “offal,” which contains minced cows’ brains, *to cows* in industrial feedlots.<sup>60</sup>

There is, of course, a place for the appreciation of the information and technology science has provided, and any irrational rejection of sensible scientific certainties would surely be a mistake. However, the continual barrage of often-spurious scientific truths and professional pronouncements warrants a skeptical ear and an understanding that such packaged “knowledge” is very seldom unbiased about its own indispensability. In fact it often employs a whole range of aesthetic and communicative techniques in academia, in the market, in media, and in government, for arresting any possibilities of dissent, and asserting its own importance to “humanity.”<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, as the catastrophes of this piecemeal, technocratic way of making knowledge and judgments mount, substituting

---

<sup>60</sup> For an understanding of “mad cow” disease and other spongiform encephalopathic diseases interested readers can begin by visiting <http://www.bmb.leeds.ac.uk/mbiology/ug/ugteach/micr3290/bse.html> which provides a list of additional links.

<sup>61</sup> Latour, 1984, explores a few of these techniques, mostly as they operate with the “scientific community.”

what the “studies show” for what local knowledge suspects is losing its justification. Political practice, which concerns the world people have in common, requires that citizens have some conception of what that world is and some faith in their own ability to be effective actors within it, and also that they have some attachment to it that brings them together as a political community and prompts them to political action. The contemporary “economy” of scientific information seems to undermine each of these political pre-conditions. First it largely presents this common world to each person in such a way that only a few narrow aspects of it can be known with a knowledge supposedly sophisticated enough to serve as a legitimate basis for political action. Secondly it interrupts to some degree the meaning-making process through which an aesthetically and ethically charged “sense” of the immediate world is, in part, fostered.

In the Enlightenment era science was considered a worthy pursuit of the genteel class, for whom political participation was exclusively reserved, even while profiteering was still somewhat frowned upon. If this scientific spirit of the Enlightenment had not become beholden to a global market economy and to state power, it may have been directed toward more humanistic ends. The political predicaments in which many people find themselves in a risk society warrant a critical interrogation of one-dimensional stories of scientific progress, which pretend that all previous technological activity has been leading to where we are now. All “other” social organizations of technical activity are assumed to be situated somewhere prior to our present state at the latest frontier of knowledge along a singular path of development. However, what we today take as Science or Technology might well be seen as just a spasmodic episode of technical hyperactivity that has been the result of particular, and arguably perverted, historical

circumstances. If, as Bookchin speculated, “the town-meeting conception of democracy had been fostered as against the aristocratic proclivities for hierarchy; if individualism had become an ethical ideal instead of congealing into a sick [sic] proprietary egotism; [...] if capital concentration had been inhibited by cooperatives and small worker-controlled enterprises,”<sup>62</sup> could the scientific and technological revolution have been harnessed to bring a more legible rather than more inaccessible world to everyday people? Were it not under the formative hand of the nation state, would scientific advancement have been defined in terms of the proliferation of commodities, sending men to the moon, or splitting atoms? Could it have been defined instead by the goal of each person becoming more competent to inhabit the totality of their environment, and more empowered to interpret their surroundings? And, more pertinently, is it possible today for a popular critique and resistance to the scientific technocracy to re-appropriate reason for different ends?

*The abstract ecology of spatial practice; maps and urbanization*

The eventual focus of Beck’s analysis of risk society centers on the important problem of exposing the sub-political arena of the science of risk assessment where power flows as knowledge through decidedly non-democratic social structures. Without downplaying the importance of that project, I have tried to focus on the aesthetics of the human relationship to the physical world that is fostered in risk society. I have chosen to concentrate on “this fundamental theoretical trait of risk

---

<sup>62</sup> Bookchin and Foreman, 1991 p. 55-56

consciousness,” which Beck asserts “is of anthropological importance,”<sup>63</sup> because it is a fundamental theoretical trait that is eventually also of ecological, ethical, and political importance, and which is an anthropologically important trait of modernity that goes beyond risk consciousness. Once the outlines of this general condition, this removed mode of worldly interaction—this abstract ecology—are traced, one can recognize its shadowy figure in other aspects of the everyday life-world.

The physically abstracting modality of scientific discourse, which becomes prominent in a risk society, has its corollary in spatial practice, or the practice of negotiating and conceptualizing spatial terrains. The map, particularly, has become a principle technique for mediating the active relation of people to places. As a technology for situating oneself and one’s activity in space, maps provide a signifying mediation between the world-as-perceived and the action the perceiver takes in the world, or in Heidegger terms, between the “being-in-the-world” and the “coming-into-being of the world.” For the map user the terrain as it is actively perceived is submitted to a homogenizing transformation into the interchangeable significances of the map in which the user positions herself. Common denomination is a necessary precondition of the mechanistic enumeration of space entailed in modern cartography. The experience of waking up from a deep sleep and not knowing one’s whereabouts or the sensation of simply being “lost” is characterized by a vividness peculiar to “off the map” experiences. Of course it is usually the case that the map user is lost before realizing it. One may be lost but still “on the map” before the realization, for example, that an “eastbound” route is heading into the setting sun, or that the trail to a creek is winding up the side of a mountain. When the presence of

---

<sup>63</sup> Beck, 1992 p. 72

mind returns after fully waking, or when the lost person finds her location on the map, the sensation is that of a gestalt shift. The immediate surroundings fall into place with respect to an overarching matrix of spatial knowledge, which always works toward the exclusion of the nuance and the detail of the surrounding terrain from the practice of negotiating the environment.

This is not to say that a dumfounded state of spatial ignorance is needed in order to have an authentic experience of the world. This kind of quasi-gestalt episode underscores the degree to which maps can function to mediate spatial practice and insulate the subject from the component complexities of their environments. However, the conceptual organization of an immediate situation in respect to other places is necessary for the very elementary act of going from one place to another. The notion that any means of such conceptualization renders a less engaged mode of perceiving the immediate environment would certainly meet with well-founded skepticism. However, the relationship between the perception of the immediate, on the one hand, and the organization of the immediate in a broader schema for moving around in the world, on the other, can be illuminated by distinguishing between ways of achieving this conceptual organization.

In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau distinguishes “between two symbolic and anthropological languages of space.”<sup>64</sup> One takes the form of a “tour” and represents space through “histories” of inhabitational activity. The other takes the form of a “map,” which de Certeau characterizes as a “totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a “state” of geographical knowledge, [which] pushes away into its prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the

---

<sup>64</sup> Certeau, 1984, p. 119

wings, the operations [i.e. operations of being-in-the-world] of which it is the result or the necessary condition.”<sup>65</sup>

De Certeau points out that the physical inscription of the representation does not necessarily constitute a case of a “map” type representation. “The first medieval maps included only the rectilinear marking out of itineraries (performative indications chiefly concerning pilgrimages), along with the stops one was to make (cities which one was to pass through, spend the night, pray at, etc.) and distances calculated in hours or in days, that is, in terms of the time it would take to cover them on foot.”<sup>66</sup> These inscriptions (maps) have, as de Certeau points out, gradually become more independent from the acts of environmental engagement necessary for their creation. For de Certeau, “it seems that in passing from “ordinary” culture to scientific discourse, one passes from one pole to the other.”<sup>67</sup> Instead of representing an act of spatial way-finding, maps come to confer specific significances on the totality of the milieu in which all such acts past, present, and future, must necessarily take place. The political and sub-political application of modern cartographic technologies, cadastral registers, geographical information systems, and global positioning techniques therefore acts as a geo-spatial panopticon, the illusion of a paternal omniscient presence, which the state wants, if not to become, to be conspicuously affiliated with. Through the informational cornucopia of the geo-spatial panopticon, the active inhabitation of space as a socially productive process of meaning-making, is appropriated from everyday people to facilitate radically disengaged modes of navigation and anaesthetized modes of physical inhabitation.

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 121

<sup>66</sup> Ibid p. 120

<sup>67</sup> Ibid p. 119

De Certeau would be the first to stress that these effects are too easily overblown. Maps, as artifacts incorporated into the average person's life, are necessarily incomplete, and its negative space always lies by omission. Way-finding and spatial representation can never be a completely passive, disengaged, or de-worlded practice. Nevertheless, these practices increasingly operate under the tutelage and within the strictures of imported representations and interpretations of space.

What cartographic technologies accomplish through a general informational encapsulation of spatial practice, architecture accomplishes on a very particular, spatially incremental level. In the built environments of urban, suburban, or industrial landscapes, the physicalities of architected spaces, like many other aspects of the modern life-world, is not to be taken at face value. Everywhere the visible, palpable, material world is inscribed with invisible significances of a mechanistic, reductive kind. The ultimate example, perhaps, is the property line, an invisible demarcation on the landscape, absolute and rigid in its abstraction, with utmost significance. The raw physicalities of undisciplined, "pre-urban" landscapes were overlaid in the consciousness with dangers and "zones," things with soft edges—impermanent and organic. Modern terrains, however, are overlaid with thresholds, risks, lines, and codified "geo-metrics."

In The Production of Space Henri Lefebvre captured this distinction by differentiating between "abstract" and "absolute" space. In abstract space, landscapes, and things function as concretized relationships between people. It would be that space is reorganized into a social code, but "social" implies too much nuance. Rather the social is distilled down to a mechanistic, economic code and then invested into space through urban architecture. In pre-urban terrains danger zones and safe zones must be discerned

and navigated with great attentiveness to experiential and sensual cues. Navigating urban space increasingly becomes a social process of reproducing, through structured bodily compartments, coded social and material relations. Thresholds, curbs, signs, signals, flowers, lawns, and lines on the ground attempt to make unambiguous distinctions between where bodies and things do and do not “have any business.” De Certeau seems struck by the aesthetics of this when he views Manhattan from atop the World Trade Center.

On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production...To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn in and return it according to an anonymous law...<sup>68</sup>

This is perhaps carried to extremes, though, in the suburban world even more than in the urban world, for, as de Certeau maintains, in the urban environment the physicalities are often re-appropriated, thereby giving a glimpse of pre-modern or pre-urban ecologies. Gangsters, bike couriers, skaters, homeless people, children, the mentally “unstable,” police officers, and other outlaws frequently “rise above” the disciplining matrix of imperceptible significations, interacting with the *materiel* of this environment in ways that obviate the insinuations of its inscribed codes of conduct.

Just as a fish in a stream must learn to navigate in an environment of resistant forces and bodies, so must we. For fish interactions with rocks, currents, little fish, and big fish are consequential and meaningful episodes. It is much the same for humans in their modernized environments, except to a greater and greater degree the meaningful,

---

<sup>68</sup> Certeau, 1984 p. 91-92

consequential episodes in their lives, the forces that steer them here and there and the things they run up against, are market forces, risk calculations, warnings, permits, citations, rules, maps, and symbols. Most of all, through the informational knowledge economy of science, the cartographical conceptualization of space, and in the navigation of urbanized terrains, to greater degrees it is *information about things* that is encountered rather than *the things themselves*. Or more exactly, it is the significances imparted to material things by alien agencies that confront the person, rather than significances remade through active engagement on the basis of daily inhabitational experience by the inhabitant. Little wonder if it were also, as Marcuse has argued, prepackaged information about ourselves that we run up against, more than the actual mental/spiritual/social/political limitations of “human nature.”<sup>69</sup>

Recognizing this abstract ecology for its subtle but ubiquitous effects may be a crucial part of developing environmental critiques with real potential for the necessary social change. As the abstract ecologies of modern individuals alienate their lifework more and more from the material of the immediate environment the worldly, engaged, agentive consciousness, which correlates to a vivid and rich conception of an outer world, is eroded.

### *Situating the environment in discourse*

It is precisely this material world in its myriad immediate manifestations as places, locales, or landscapes that must be brought back into the focus of consciousness.

---

<sup>69</sup> This latter argument is advanced by Herbert Marcuse in One Dimensional Man, as well as by many other critical theorists.

Both the putatively missed civic spirit and the much-vaunted environmental conscience are at stake. Instead of being seen as a limited and barely significant portion of an imagined biotic community called “the global environment” whose many component complexities are watched over by the branches of science and governments, these local environments might be re-imagined as public spheres in which inhabitants are competent to operate economically, epistemically, and, therefore, politically.

Tim Ingold offers an excellent exposition of the ecological alienation reflected in the global environmental discourse. For Ingold, a significant distinction is reflected in the juxtaposition of the global imagery of much of contemporary environmental rhetoric and the spherical cosmologies of pre-modern societies. Where the global imagery frames the environment as a surface to be occupied and an opaque object to be surrounded (the environment of the environment!), the spherical cosmology places the person inside the world. Ingold recognizes that the conception of the environment as a life-world

rests on an altogether different mode of apprehension—one based on practical, perceptual engagement with components of a world that is inhabited or dwelt-in, rather than on the detached, disinterested observation of a world that is merely occupied. In the local perspective the world is a sphere, or perhaps a nesting series of spheres [...] centered on a particular place. From this experiential centre, the attention of those who live there is drawn ever deeper *into* the world, in the quest for knowledge and understanding. It is through such attentive engagement, entailed in the very process of dwelling, that the world is progressively revealed to the knowledge seeker.<sup>70</sup>

Such a mode of apprehension stands in stark contrast to the mode of apprehending reality that is fostered in the modern human ecology wherein people are drawn ever further away from the world. It is, however, something more than the global

---

<sup>70</sup> Ingold, 2000 p. 216

representation of the world that is at work here. The purported solutions to environmental problems that promise the sustainable development of capitalist economies, or the centralized bureaucratic governance of human ecological interaction, are supported by a more comprehensive cultural phenomenon, which I have been attempting to capture. Ingold's observations are prescient, perhaps more prescient than he knew. It is not only these discourses of global environmental peril and salvation that lead "to the systematic disempowerment of local communities, taking from them [...] the responsibility to care for their own environments."<sup>71</sup> Rather it is a whole set of mediating semiotic and discursive conventions that bear upon the individual as a disengaged, desensitized, and disempowered mode of incorporating the outer world.

The invisible significances of architected space, of cadastral geo-metrics, of hostile and/or useful extrusions of nature, or of risky interactions with our world—these are consequential surroundings that now act upon humans, delimiting possibilities of actions, thus giving shape to habits and acting on minds to inscribe in the modern consciousness an anaesthetized conception of an outer reality, and a depressed conception of our own capacity as political agents within it. This may be the greater part of the meaning of the environmentalist lament that "people are no longer at one with nature." It becomes apparent that this ecology coincides with the increasing withdrawal from the public sphere, indeed from the world itself, as more and more people try "to remain altogether private men."<sup>72</sup> When public figures lament the "decline of community and civic virtue" should we not suspect that it stems in part from the diminution in consciousness of the physical and experiential realm of worldly interaction? After all,

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 155

<sup>72</sup> Mills, 1959 p. 5

short of the contrived dream of the “nation,”<sup>73</sup> what is to bind communities if not physical proximity, common experiences with a common habitat, and the values that issue from them? And finally, when cynical environmentalists support the notion that local forms of sovereignty are hopeless in the context of a global environmental crisis because “people simply don’t care about nature,” is it not appropriate to ask, “Why would a people value their world when the world as it is aesthetically experienced seems to have less and less meaning?”

Environments, which are composed of “all the terrains, water, climates, soils, architectures, technologies, societies, economies, cultures or states” surrounding a person, contain “nature” and are also the matrix of public life and the medium of social relations. I have argued that the modality of the discursive and architectural vectors comprising the modern ecologies of people are actualized as a decreased capacity to comprehend and engage with these physically proximal environments in an aesthetically holistic way. I am further suggesting that this is a singular phenomenon that is at the root of two issues, which are too often seen as unrelated—one being a problem of environmental ethics and the other being a problem of an evacuated or dysfunctional public sphere. Immediate physical surroundings are less fully and wholly experienced, and therefore tend neither to engender an environmental ethic, nor to serve as a common arena, or a public sphere. The next chapter concentrates on the works of Daniel Kemmis and Wendell Berry, two authors whose concern with politics, community, and environmental issues is rooted at some level in a consideration of this condition.

---

<sup>73</sup> See Anderson, 1983, for a historical discussion of the craft of fabricating imagined national communities. Anderson incidentally suggests the possibility that all communities are “imagined” on some level. If we accept that he is correct, the critical Leninist question remains: Who? Whom? Who produces what in the imagination of whom? And why?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Alternative ecologies

Daniel Kemmis and Wendell Berry are two among many ecologically oriented critics who point the way toward alternative forms of political or economic organization which would begin to create more engaged ways of knowing, judging, and acting in environments as public spheres. I choose to concentrate on these two writers specifically since each makes a contribution to this discussion in different but mutually complimentary ways. Daniel Kemmis' political critique argues that place has a crucial role to play in cultivating thicker forms of self-government, while Wendell Berry offers a critique of current economic organization that stresses the crucial role that specialization plays in interrupting human relationships with the land and disassembling public spheres.

#### *Daniel Kemmis and the role of places in politics*

In Daniel Kemmis we find a rare combination; he is an astute and radical critic of society and politics, and he is also a seasoned and influential politician. Kemmis served

in the Montana House of Representatives, where he eventually became House Speaker of the Democratic minority. He has also served as Mayor of Missoula, Montana. His philosophy has been greatly influenced and informed by his political experiences, but in equal measure he draws inspiration from a deep attachment to his Montana home. Daniel Kemmis has lived almost his entire life in his native state of Montana, leaving only for a few years to study political theory and law at Harvard. Far from interjecting an absurd romanticism into his philosophy, Kemmis' deep attachment to his home land, and the recognition of the same in his fellow citizens, is turned to account as an integral part of his political thought. In Kemmis' view, the sentiments and incentives that attach people to place-based communities, whether they are Montanans or Californians, Mongolians or Tanzanians, are more than politically peripheral niceties. Rather these sentiments are among the indispensable elements of democratic citizenship. If we hope to rescue democracy from its current dysfunctions, Kemmis believes, we must form our social, political, and economic institutions to the object of cultivating exactly these sentiments.

In his book, Community and the Politics of Place, Kemmis presents a critique of the failures of centralized bureaucratic governance and an exploration of the possibilities of place-based political autonomy. It is the most far reaching of Kemmis' three books, voicing the philosophy and the logic that serve as the foundation for his two subsequent books, The Good City and the Good Life (1995) and This Sovereign Land: How the West Could Govern Itself (2001). In each of these books, Kemmis has avoided the retrogressive atavism and emotive romanticism that characterizes some bioregionalist voices, while at the same time sustaining a strong, radical critique of the status-quo in U.S. politics.

Community and the Politics of Place is at the most basic level a book about self-government. For Kemmis the worsening failures of public life are rooted in the abandonment of direct, democratic citizen participation. Thus Kemmis is led to rethink questions about human nature that were essentially put to rest in American political thought over two hundred years ago. Specifically, Kemmis is recalling the “great and hidden debate”<sup>74</sup> between the classical republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, who believed that the ultimate wellspring of democracy was the civic virtue of its citizens, and the Federalists, essentially led by James Madison, who came to the conclusion that democracy could only endure by virtue of an intelligently engineered political machinery. The federalists would argue for leaving social decision making in the hands of representatives who would check and balance each other’s power in the operations of the state and national governments. As Kemmis clearly explains, instead of depending on “virtuous citizens” to engage in public discourse with their countrymen, formulate a vision of the public good, and assert that vision through the democratic process, the Madisonian system envisioned a new kind of materially robust public good that would not need to be consciously formulated.<sup>75</sup> It would be a public good fashioned from innumerable private interests. A strictly upheld, detailed, and concrete system of laws protecting private property and individual rights would channel the energy of these individuals toward a common weal.

In essence, the Federalists’ worry was that the supposedly virtuous citizens would misapprehend the public good. In any case, the invisible hand guiding the market-like mechanism of massive election processes was assumed to be wiser than any collection of

---

<sup>74</sup> Kemmis, 1990 p. 13

<sup>75</sup> Ibid p. 15

citizens no matter how virtuous. Even more worrisome was a threat that the dreaded cancer of faction would devour the fragile union. So the Madisonian vision for America, which the nation continues in large part to live out today, claims to depend for its excellence only on citizens acting on their individual self-interest. So carefully is the legal and political structure designed, that “ambition [is] made to counteract ambition”.<sup>76</sup> Kemmis provides a compelling and grounded articulation of the growing suspicion that, in light of the current crises of ecological and social dysfunction, the Madisonian method for seeking and attaining the public good was in fact too simplistic, too easy, and maybe too good to be true. Kemmis believes that the current political, ecological, and social problems of the United States can only be addressed by revisiting this old debate in light of new societal developments.

Kemmis points to falling voter turnout, deepening distrust in government, and withdrawal from public life as symptoms of an advancing crisis of democracy in the United States. For Kemmis, addressing the crisis of self-government requires recognizing *places* as politically important constitutive aspects of communities. Perhaps it was not always necessary to explicitly criticize “placeless” politics, but in the present age of increasing fluidity of information and materials Kemmis’ critique has arguably become necessary precisely because it is increasingly possible, at least in the short term, for politics to ignore locality. “Public life as we all too often experience it now is very much like a Big Mac—it can be replicated, in exactly the same form, anywhere. And just as our acceptance of placeless “food,” consumed under placeless yellow “landmarks,” weakens both our sense of food and of place, so too does the general placelessness of our

---

<sup>76</sup> Publius, 1788, No. 51

political thought weaken both our sense of politics and of place.”<sup>77</sup> Taking a cue from Hannah Arendt, Kemmis believes it is necessary to carefully reconsider how place, as the material medium of social relations, is experienced, conceptualized and politicized. It is worthwhile here to restate the quotation of Arendt that is so important to Kemmis’ “understanding of the conditions of public life.”<sup>78</sup>

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things exists between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and at the same time prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass Society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick see it vanish from their midst, so that the two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated by anything tangible.<sup>79</sup>

Kemmis acknowledges that his own apprehension of Arendt’s statement diverges somewhat from her original intent. He notes Arendt believed that “public things were necessarily the work of human hands.” Kemmis on the other hand applies “the concept of the “res” to mountains and rivers.”<sup>80</sup> Notwithstanding their possible disagreement, Arendt’s hunch leads Kemmis to consider the important question of what has happened to the “res” of the *res-publica*.<sup>81</sup> Or as he states it, “Our question then is what happened to the public thing: how did the table vanish?” Of course the physical landscapes in which people live have not literally vanished, but Kemmis is asking a very important

---

<sup>77</sup> Kemmis, 1990 p. 7

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>79</sup> Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition; quoted in Kemmis, 1990 p. 5-6

<sup>80</sup> Kemmis, 1990 p.8

<sup>81</sup> Kemmis uses the Latin meaning of the word “republic” (public thing) metaphorically, suggesting that the public has been abstracted from the “res,” the “thing” which he identifies with the physical landscape.

question about how immediate environments are incorporated into daily, especially public, life. That is, Kemmis senses an important shift in the subjective human ecology in his home state of Montana and in the modern “human condition” generally.

Kemmis argues that a new kind of politics, along civic republican lines, is necessary to enable political practice to respond more intimately and with greater possibility to particular places. But at the same time a new way of envisioning place is needed to actualize people’s civic potential. This is an important simultaneity in Kemmis’ argument. Realizing true potentials for autonomous self-government requires, but also fosters, a new way of apprehending the physical environments. Likewise a renewed and more meaningful apprehension of local environments fosters, and is also fostered by, a participatory, autonomous political culture. This important point is well illustrated in an example given by Kemmis of a controversy between the owners of a pulp mill (and the local saw mills who depend on their patronage) and an environmental advocacy group. When the special interests of these groups are weighed and arbitrated by a third party, the Clark Fork River can go on being just a sink to the pulp mill owners, and it can be just a wildlife habitat to the environmentalists. “But if they were allowed [or perhaps compelled] to solve their problems (and manage their resources) themselves, they would soon discover that no one wants local sawmills closed, and no one wants wildlife habitat annihilated. If encouraged to collaborate, they would learn to inhabit the place on the place’s own terms better than any regulatory bureaucracy would ever accomplish.”<sup>82</sup> When decisions such as how to regulate potentially polluting practices of local economic activities, or how and when to protect open space, historical sites, or local businesses from market forces, become the responsibility of the inhabitants rather than a

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 126-127

distant expert agency, citizens may be forced into a rewarding mode of collaboration rather than an embittering mode of narrow-minded dogmatism. Kemmis stresses that in the end, “there are not many rivers, one for each of us, but only this one river, and if we all want to stay here, in some kind of relationship to the river, then we have to learn, somehow, to live together.”<sup>83</sup>

Probably the most important insight of Kemmis’ work is his elaboration of the observation that “what holds people together long enough to discover their power as citizens is their common inhabiting of a single place.”<sup>84</sup> However, Kemmis recognizes that simply existing in the same space is necessary but not sufficient to revitalize self-government. For as the abstract ecologies of the citizen-clientele and specialist-professionals in a fast-capitalist risk society has taken the place of an agentive engagement with a geographic locality, the world that physically exists between citizens has indeed “lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.”<sup>85</sup>

*Wendell Berry and the ecologies of experts and clients*

The extent to which many people, who physically “live” side by side, can actually be said to be sharing a common habitat, or inhabiting a single place is deeply questionable. The realm in which most people’s personal agency and life activity registers is not their physical environs but the informational habitats of the “banking world,” “the design world,” “the business world,” “the entertainment world,” or (and this may be the most telling) the “political world.” For the modern professional, the concept

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 117

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 117)

<sup>85</sup> Arendt, 1958, quoted in Kemmis, 1990 p. 6

of inhabitation applies more fittingly to their negotiation of the abstract, informational terrains of state bureaucracies, financial markets, responsibility diffusion and fragmentation systems, and professional worlds. The critical function of place in shaping what Kemmis calls a “neighborly citizenship” and edifying a “politics of inhabitation,” depends, therefore, upon somehow altering the human ecology so that “bioregions” can come to be inhabited in the same meaningful, agentive, engaged way that young urban professionals inhabit their respective “technoregions.”

Wendell Berry, an ecological thinker, cultural critic, and preeminent spokesman for agrarianism in America, has consistently submitted grave concerns about the “socially and ecologically destructive”<sup>86</sup> cult of specialization. Berry notes “from the standpoint of the social system, the aim of specialization may seem desirable enough. The aim is to see that the responsibilities of government, law, medicine, engineering, agriculture, education, etc., are given into the hands of the most skilled, best prepared people.”<sup>87</sup> The benefits of specialization are many and the drawbacks are few from the perspective of planners, governmental agents, and any other visionaries who are accustomed to “seeing like a state.”<sup>88</sup> For a more complete understanding of the sociology of specialization, though, it is necessary to approach it, as Berry does, from a subjective perspective in order to discover those social forces that are so often invisible from the perspective of states and those who share their vision. As Berry observes “the first and best known hazard of the specialist system is that it produces specialists—people who are elaborately and expensively trained to do one thing.”<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Berry, 1970 p.95

<sup>87</sup> Berry, 1977 p.19

<sup>88</sup> For a wide-ranging critique of the peculiarities of this perspective and its ramifications, see Scott, 1998.

<sup>89</sup> Berry, 1977 p. 19

Most respected careers presuppose a degree of specialization, often a very high degree of it. It seems that little is more promising in an up-starting professional than an engrossing interest in some minute obscurity within a lucrative “field.” The sphere of meaningful, consequential, unmediated interaction with the physical world is increasingly reduced to a single specialty called a profession, which is infinitesimal in scope, and in this “natural habitat” of the specialist, in which he manifests his life or does his lifework, triumph or failure happens mostly on paper, or in the ether. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is largely delivered up to the person in packaged form, statistically determined to be “safe” for consumption, whether it comes as goods or as experiences—chicken nuggets or a ski vacation.

While the specialization of the scientific process has rendered the world more comprehensible to “humanity,” and to the concatenations of power that operate under its cloak, it has also, as Beck’s sociological analysis reveals, rendered it more illegible and less meaning-full to most humans. But while specialization, and the techno-scientific advancements it makes possible, have made people more dependent on others to interpret the world for them, thus giving a fundamentally social dimension to technical activity, it has simultaneously tended to insulate that activity from the political or social realm. As Berry notes, “specialization has tended to draw the specialist toward the discipline that will lead to the discovery of new facts or processes within a narrowly defined area and it has tended to lead him away from or distract him from those disciplines by which he might consider the *effects* of his discovery upon human society or upon the world.”<sup>90</sup>

“[W]hile specialization has increased knowledge, it has fragmented it.”<sup>91</sup> The

---

<sup>90</sup> Berry, 1970 p. 95

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 95

specialist's agency is profoundly separated from any tangible, truly public sphere. The specialist is equipped with little responsibility or competence to consider the effects of his specialized work, and often little interest in doing so, partly because the world that is occurring physically all around him hardly occurs to the specialist at all.

*Living in the landscape*

As physical surroundings are sublimated in a consciousness formed through the abstract ecologies of clients and experts, the landscapes amongst which people live “go under.” Their meaning erodes as they become peripheral distractions, curiosities at a distance, mere physicalities to be avoided, and extents to be overcome. Berry notices the strangeness of this contemporary (an)aesthetics of (non)place in his hometown.

This Port Royal, this state of Kentucky, these United States, in which everything is supposedly named and numbered and priced, are unlikely to know what lies out of sight of the paved roads. I walk often through places unknown by name or fact or event to people who live almost within calling distance of them, yet more worthy of their interest, I think, than the distant places to which they devote so much of their attention. If we were truly a civilized and indigenous people such places would be named for what is characteristic of them, they would be known and talked about, people would visit them as they now visit places of commercial entertainment, as familiarly as they visit friends... There would be a lore about them that each generation would both inherit and add to. Knowledge of them would pass intimately through families and friendships... The human value of the land would then come to be what humans knew about it, and wealth would no longer prey on it.”<sup>92</sup>

Berry describes an increasingly uncommon, way of knowing and acting in space. If, as Kemmis believes, geographic locality is a socially constitutive medium of public life, this basically aesthetic phenomenon may have important political implications. The

---

<sup>92</sup> Berry, 1970 p. 49-50

distinction described by Berry is between a more unmediated “ecology” of spatial practice and a more abstract mode of appropriating the world that is characteristic of modern life. This effect, this distinction, is a matter of perceiving the same surroundings in different ways, but it is also most likely a matter of acting in and navigating environments in different ways and thus being exposed to a new subset of experiences within the same place. With increasingly efficient mechanisms of law enforcement, and increasing paranoia and litigiousness toward other people, especially in America, bodily movement, whether motorized or not, is increasingly constrained within prescribed and fixed trajectories defined by planners, architects, governments, and corporate or private landholders. Classical liberal narratives of individual freedom remain unscathed as bodily freedom is gradually and surreptitiously circumscribed. The governmentally problematic freedom to move one’s body over the physical terrain is replaced by the freedom to move one’s money over much more easily surveyed and governed terrains of the global market.

In his writing Berry frequently describes ways of bodily experiencing the landscape that presuppose a wider scope of ambulatory freedom that many people now seem to have. Bodily inhabiting landscapes in more aesthetically and epistemologically unmediated way might entail exploring new ways of what Henri Lefebvre would call “producing space.”<sup>93</sup> Lefebvre’s phrase may seem unnecessarily vague, but there is really nothing mysterious about its meaning. A good example can be found in Berry’s anecdotal quotation of a Vermonter who angrily upbraids the “down-country people” or “upper-class eco-folks” who, in posting their land to protect wildlife, “violate... a strong

---

<sup>93</sup> See Lefebvre, 1974

local tradition of free trespass.”<sup>94</sup> Whenever a new property line is posted, a chain link fence is erected, whenever a straighter highway is graded, higher bridge is built, or a telecommunications line brings a new house online, abstract space is produced, “absolute space” is in danger of being digested, and ways of experiencing the landscape change.

By greater degrees, the spaces within which many populations exist are remade with respect to the human subject through the policing and envioning actions of professional architects, knowledge makers, and judgment enforcers who usually come from somewhere else. If local environments are to become public spheres in the way that Kemmis believes they should, architectural and land use matters, as well as economic patterns of the production and consumption of both goods and knowledge, must be opened up to political consideration as powerful factors in shaping the relationship between citizens and the environments that they inhabit in common.

---

<sup>94</sup> Berry (1977) p.28

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Conclusion**

More engaged ways of perceiving and interacting with the environments and more engaged political means of settling upon the public good are intertwined in an alternative vision for modernity surfacing in the works of Berry, Kemmis, and the many others who have contributed along similar lines. Although Bookchin's social ecology is rooted in a much more radical political philosophy than a politician like Kemmis is likely to espouse, there are significant convergences in their politics. The emphasis on local or regional autonomy, decentralization, and direct democracy in Kemmis' politics gesture in the same direction as Bookchin's social ecology with its visions of anarchic, confederalist eco-communities. Both Kemmis and Bookchin stress the need for social structures where political, social, and economic relations would involve more immediate interactions between people and their environments. Kemmis specifically recognizes not only the role that participatory place-based politics could play in safeguarding local environments, but also the role that local environments can play in fostering more effective civic

practice. However, as Kemmis contends, the potential of places or physical surroundings to bring people together is rarely fully actualized in contemporary society.

Kemmis chiefly implicates the large-scale, Madisonian “politics of separation” in this going-under of the common world. He concludes that Rousseau’s centuries old observation was prescient: “keeping citizens apart has become the first maxim of modern politics.”<sup>95</sup> Kemmis believes

It was no accident that this approach to public life was put forward by people who were centrally interested in creating optimal conditions for an expanding commercial and industrial economy. The federalist plan of government was exactly analogous to Adam Smith’s invisible hand, which wrought the highest good in the market even though none of the actors were seeking anything beyond their own individual interest. Smith introduced the concept of the invisible hand into economics in 1776. Twelve years later Madison introduced it into politics. With its advent in that realm, the *res* of the *res publica* lost its function. It, too, became invisible.<sup>96</sup>

Kemmis believes a politics of “engagement” or “re-inhabitation” is necessary to bring into view, through political practice, the “public thing.” Realizing meaningful political autonomy on a local level would thus depend on unmaking what Kemmis calls the “politics of separation,” and devolving political decision making to local government. However if this “politics of re-inhabitation” remains within the confines of traditional politics, it may ultimately fall short both politically and ecologically much as current structures of political economy have.

A critique of what might be called the “sub-politics of separation,” and some form of decentralization of sub-political agency is also necessary, especially so if communities are to gain or preserve the responsibility, competence, and the will to safeguard their

---

<sup>95</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau quoted in Kemmis, 1990 p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> Kemmis, 1990 p. 15-16

environments. This would entail a critical skepticism toward externally produced technologies and scientific knowledge. It may involve making the production of local knowledge and judgements a much greater priority. It may mean introducing new curricula into schools, which would engage students in a continual processes of making local knowledge about what makes the flora, fauna, architecture, technical systems, soils, history, economics, watersheds, and politics of their own communities unique, instead of concentrating so heavily on learning prepared knowledge about the generalities that reduce all places to common terms, and practicing the prescribed behaviors that prepare workers for sessile occupations in placeless economies. A sub-politics of re-inhabitation would need to consider the implications of architecturally altered, especially “urbanized,” landscapes and think about what it may mean to preserve social spaces, rather than engineering vacuous “public” spaces. And finally such a project may have to consider the abstracting effects of the disengaged cycles of economic production and consumption that characterize the global economy.

Kemmis’ hope for participatory democracy depends on an awareness of these many diverse battlefronts in the struggle for greater local autonomy. They are being addressed by cultural critics such as Berry, sociologists of science such as Beck, anthropologists like Ingold, and philosophers of space like Lefebvre and de Certeau. The works of these authors begin to elucidate a mode of environmental interaction that lends itself to a reconstruction of both the world and the self in consciousness. As the aesthetics of acting in the world are discounted as having less and less consequence or import, the self is conceived as more and more separate from the world and less enabled to know it or to effectively engage with it. The hierarchies of informational knowledge economies,

abstract discourses of ecological peril, and the disengaging technologies of spatial practice, which keep people apart by keeping them separated from their common world, can therefore be seen as a daunting bloc of additional obstacles to political autonomy. However they may just as well be seen as additional opportunities for gaining autonomy, since resisting external technocratic control of local environments along all fronts could be more effective than resistance only along the avenues of traditional politics.

Moreover, causality cuts both ways. Cultivating critical incredulity toward, and practicing direct counteraction against, the sub-politics of separation may foster social connections *between* people and *through* places in ways that make direct self-government a more viable solution to environmental problems than it presently seems to be. On the other hand, because direct political action on the part of citizens, especially pertaining to local economic and “land use” matters, puts people in a position where their knowledge of many more aspects of the immediate environment has real consequences, citizens may be propelled to a more critical incredulity toward professional prescriptions a prompted to enact, through the making of local knowledge, direct subversions of the anaesthetizing, abstract ecology of modern life.

Specific geographical localities, when claimed as realms of local sovereignty, agency and knowledge, could provide a context for the reintegration of people into “real,” place-based communities. If landscapes were to become inhabited biotic communities, lived-in places, objects of participatory political action, and agents in localized circuits of production and consumption, rather than simply visual tableaux or pieces of “The Environment,” they might function as the antidote to the abstract mode of apprehension that tends to stop short latent social connections between people and their

surroundings. Places can in this way become the milieux of common work, the objects of shared commitment, theatres of a political agency common to all citizen/inhabitants, and the progenitors of common values. It is through these worldly practical forms of engagement with a particular place that an organism's environment might come to "invite wonder, admiration, and foster an aesthetic as well as caring sensibility..."<sup>97</sup> as Bookchin, Berry, and many others believe it can. It is through an agentive, aesthetically holistic kind of inhabitation of an immediate material world that the world is revealed as a world of wonder—no less wonder-full for its worldliness, and no less worldly for the depth of its wonders.

Discovering ecological sensibilities and developing the political structures that would give them meaningful avenues of expression are, therefore, largely one and the same project. Both depend upon acting on the realization that, as Bookchin contends, "normal people have the ability to reason *on a level* that does not differ from that of humanity's most brilliant individuals."<sup>98</sup> That is, people must realize that it is within their powers—that it is not only a right, but an imperative—to become boatmen rather than passengers. To actively participate in ascertaining the dangers ahead. To lean over the bow and peer toward the horizon instead of strapping in and lowing the shades to watch the in-flight movie. To make judgments among themselves, because, despite the illusion of mastery and understanding of the world, which he propagates by the market- and media-savvy dazzle and hocus-pocus of his scientific knowledge, universalizing templates, and governmental expertise, the steamboat captain is asleep at the helm, dreaming like a state.

---

<sup>97</sup> Bookchin, 1989 p.163

<sup>98</sup> Bookchin, 1989 p. 198 (emphasis added)

## Bibliography

- Adams, Patricia (1994). *Property Rights and Bioregionalism*, a publication of the Cato Institute. [http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy\\_report/prop-pr.html](http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy_report/prop-pr.html)
- Ambrose, Stephen E., (1996), *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis Thomas Jefferson and the Opening of the American West*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; Touchstone Rockefeller Center 1230 Avenue of the Americas.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. London and New York, NY: Verso Publications.
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bakunin, Michael (1916). *God and the State*. New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association.
- Barber, B. (1995). *Jihad Versus McWorld; How Globalization and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, Random House.
- Bateson, Gregory (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Bateson, Gregory (1979). *Mind and Nature: A necessary unity*. New York: Bantam.
- Beck, Ulrich (1992). *Risk Society, Toward a New Modernity*. translation by Mark Ritter  
London: Sage Publications.
- Berry, W. (1970). *A Continuous Harmony*. San Diego, CA; New York, NY; London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Publishers.
- Berry, W. (1977). *The Unsettling of America; Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Billings Gazette, Feb 18, 2001, "Coal Bed Methane, Montana Watches as Wyoming Collapses", by Jeff Tollefson.
- Bookchin, Murray (1982). *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Cheshire Books, Palo Alto, CA.
- Bookchin, M. (1989). *Remaking Society*. Montreal, Quebec: Black Rose Books.
- Bookchin, Murray and Dave Foreman (1991). *Defending the Earth. A Dialogue Between*

- Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*. Boston, Mass: South End Press.
- Bookchin, Murray (1992). *Urbanization without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship*. Montreal: Black Rose Press.
- Bookchin, Murray (1996). *The Philosophy of Social Ecology; Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*. Black Rose Books: Montreal, Quebec.
- Bowers, C.A. (1997). *The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools* (Sunny Series in Environmental Public Policy). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent Spring*. New York: Fawcett Crest Books.
- Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Christian Science Monitor*, Oct 29, 2003, "Rare Sight: Ranchers and Farmers Join to Save a Bird", by Todd Wilkinson.
- Costanza, R., Herman Daly, & Thomas Prugh (2000). *The Local Politics of Global Sustainability*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Dobson, Andrew (2000). *Green Political Thought, third edition*. London and New York, Routledge.
- Dryzek, J.S. (1997). *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Eastman, Charles (1991). *Indian boyhood*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Random House Inc.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison*. New York, Vintage.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hardin, G. (1968). "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, 162 (1968): 1243-1248.

- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women; The Reinvention of Nature*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000) *Empire*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Heft, Harry (2001). *Ecological Psychology in Context: James Gibson, Roger Barker, and the Legacy of William James's Radical Empiricism* (Volume in the Resources for Ecological Psychology Series). ) Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum and associates.
- Ingold, T. (2000). *Perceptions of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jefferson, T. *Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVII* (1782).
- Kalinowski, Franklin A. (1997). "A Practical Solution to the Environmental Crisis: The Range of Options." *Public Works Management And Policy* Volume 2, Number 1, July 1997.
- Kellert, Stephen R. (Editor), Edward O. Wilson (Editor) (1993). *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Island Press, Washington, DC.
- Kemmis, D. (2001). *This Sovereign Land: How the West Could Govern Itself*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Kemmis, D. (1995). *The Good City and the Good Life*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Kropotkin, Peter (1914). *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Boston, Mass: Porter Sargent Publishers.
- Latour, Bruno (1987). *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The Production of Space*. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Leopold, Aldo (1949). *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Luke, Timothy W. (1999). *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Lyotard, Jean Francois (1979). *The Post-Modern Condition; A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

- Marcuse, Herbert (1964). *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Martin, Luther H.; Huck Gutman; and Patrick H. Hutton (editors). (1988). *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michael Foucault*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press.
- Mason, M. (1991). *Environmental Democracy*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- McKibben, B. (1989). *The End of Nature*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, Random House, Inc.
- Mills, C. Wright (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Naess, Arne (1973). "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (spring 1973): 95-100.
- Nash, Roderick (1973). *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Revised edition. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London.
- Nicolson, Magorie Hope (1959), *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: the Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Nyborg, Karene (2000). "Homo Economicus and Homo Politicus: interpretation and aggregation of environmental values." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 42, p. 305-322.
- President's Council on Sustainable Development. (1999). *Towards a Sustainable America*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.  
<<http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/Publications/tsa.pdf>>
- Publius [Madison, J., or Hamilton, A.]. (1788). *The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments*. The Federalist Papers, No. 51 (February, 8) Independent Journal.
- Reed, Edward (1996). *Encountering the World: Toward an Ecological Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Sagoff, Mark (1988). *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy Law and the Environment*. Ed. Douglas MacLean. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, James C. (1998). *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Seidell, P. (1998). *Invisible Walls; Why We Ignore the Damage We Inflict on the*

- Planet—And Ourselves*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books Inc.
- Shepard, Paul and McKinley, Daniel (eds.) (1969). *The Subversive Science: Essays Toward an Ecology of Man*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Shepard, P. (1973). *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Szasz, A. (1994). *EcoPopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Twain, M. (1983). *Life on the Mississippi* (Bantam Classic Reissue edition). New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books.
- Vanek, David (2000). "Interview with Murray Bookchin" Feature Article: *Harbinger. A Journal of Social Ecology*, Vol. 2, No. 1.
- Vitek, William & Jackson, Wes; eds. (1996). *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- White House, Official press release, Office of the Press Secretary, April 27, 2005. "President Discusses Energy at National Small Business Conference." Washington Hilton Hotel, Washington, D.C.

**Vita  
Jake Greear**

Jake Greear is the second son of Delbert and Nancy Greear and was born in Helen, Georgia in 1977. In May of 2000 he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Environmental Studies from Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina. Jake's undergraduate research focused on the use of computer modeling programs in viability analysis of threatened minnow populations. After graduation Jake spent three years working as a carpenter and as an instructor at a private school.

While pursuing a Masters degree in Political Science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Jake worked as a graduate teaching assistant and as a graduate research assistant. Jake currently has one article under editorial review for publication in "Organization and Environment," and he has also served as a panel chair and discussant for a panel on "Civic Environmentalism" at the 2005 Southwestern Political Science Association annual conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

After graduation, Jake will be moving to Baltimore, Maryland to continue his research in political theory, environmental politics, and cultural studies while pursuing a doctoral degree in Political Science at The Johns Hopkins University.