

Canyon Editions



use to which it shall be put by the profession nor what the public shall be told it means — as against the practitioner chiefs who head the university departments and professional associations, the influence of the actual practice of a Freud or an Einstein has been negligible, and the same is the case, of course, with the innovator in the arts. He is doomed to isolation by the very processes through which his work reaches society. The larger the part played by his creation in the profession the less need there is to understand it, and the greater grows the distance between his idea and the influence exerted by his work. The more widely he is known to the public the greater the misinterpretation and fantasy built upon his name and the greater the distance between himself and his social existence. The famous 'alienation of the artist' is the result not of the absence of interest of society in the artist's work but of the potential interest of all of society in it. A work not made for but 'sold' to the totality of the public would be a work totally taken away from its creator and totally falsified."

What is wrong with this picture? The deliberate organization of our prejudices, weaknesses, appetites, and passions into a spuriously coherent fabric of "public opinion," which becomes the access to the "mass market," is what is wrong with it. The moral solution for such a problem is the growth to maturity of the people at large, resulting in their rejection of the public pandering to the weaknesses they have overcome. But this will take time — a great deal of time, it may be. Eastern philosophers have said it will take at least seven lives or incarnations, and growth to maturity at this rate does not seem of much value to alienated Western thinkers who have not been brought up to regard the evolutionary problems of humanity with patience of this sort. But there is also another approach that has a more immediate effect, although the philosopher, who might approve it, would also say that moral growth is needed to give it support. This approach is the designer's solution, in contrast to the moralist's.

The designer will say, Break up the structure of the mass audience, the mass "market," by forming human communities of manageable dimensions — communities in which people's problems do not grow overwhelming by reason of the large numbers of those who have them. If people cannot suddenly attain to maturity, they can at least cope, on this smaller, human scale. E. F. Schumacher, while not neglecting the moral solution, proposed for immediate application a designer's solution. He said (in "Resurgence" for May-June 1975):

"...let us have (social units) on a human scale, so that the need for rules and regulations is minimized and all difficult cases can be resolved, as it were, on the spot, face to face, without creating precedents — for where there is no rule there cannot be a precedent.

"The problem of administration is thus reduced to a problem of size. Small units are self-administering in the sense that they do not require full-time administrators of exceptional ability; almost anybody can see to it that things are kept in reasonable order and everything that needs to be done is done by the right person at the right time.

"I should add that, as Aristotle observed, things must be neither too big or too small. I have no doubt that for every organization, as for other things, there is a 'critical size' which must be attained before the organization can have any effectiveness at all. But this is hardly a thought that needs to be specially emphasized, since everybody understands it instinctively. What does need to be emphasized is that 'critical size' is likely to be very much smaller than most people in our society are inclined to believe.

"Excessive size not only produces the dilemma of administration, it also makes many problems virtually insoluble. To illustrate what I mean, imagine an island of two thousand inhabitants — I have in mind an island of this size

which a little while ago demanded total sovereignty and independence. Crime on such an island is a rarity; maybe there is one single full-time policeman, maybe there is none. Assume, however, that some crimes do occur, that some people are sent to jail, and that they return from jail at the rate of one person a year. There is no difficulty in reintegrating this one ex-prisoner into the island's society. Someone, somewhere will find this person a room to live in and some kind of work. No problem....

"The problem of reintegrating twenty-five thousand ex-prisoners into a society twenty-five thousand times as large as that little island is quite a different problem, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, a problem the solution of which escapes the devoted efforts of Home Office, Probation Service and countless other organizations. Is it a matter of proportionately too little effort and money being devoted to this task of reintegration and rehabilitation? Could we solve the problem by having bigger prisoners' aid organizations, more people and more money? Maybe we can; maybe we cannot. I personally think we cannot. But the point is that the small island does not have the problem."

This is another sort of post-national thinking, obviously sound, obviously necessary for any sort of future worth having. It introduces, of course, what may seem another problem of large dimensions — how can we transform a mass society with the dimensions of the United States into a federated society of "bioregions"? It may come as a surprise to some readers to know that there are dozens of enterprising individuals who are working quite seriously on this problem, and who have been able to introduce, in a few areas, some modest initial changes and inquiring attitudes of mind. The first step is to begin to think in these terms, to understand the logic of life in a bioregion, and the vast number of problems that it will reduce or actually eliminate. We will continue to have moral problems, to be sure, so long as we remain human beings, but they will be reduced in size so that we are competent to deal with them. Common decencies will no longer require that individuals become virtual heroes in order to practice them. Life in properly sized communities will not necessarily produce marked changes in the moral qualities of human beings, but it will at least stop suppressing the moral attitudes and impulses they already possess. There will no longer be the marked contrast between social and individual behavior, leading thoughtful writers to do books on moral man and immoral

society. Living in small communities will remove most of the pressure put together by demagogues and "marketing experts" who make their living and attain their power through the manipulation of the grossest impulses of human beings. These people will no longer have available to them the support of vulgarized public opinion — what Max Eastman called "organized self-interest." Their excellences and human qualities will have opportunity to come to the surface and perhaps predominate.

In his recent book, "Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision" (Sierra Club, 1985), Kirkpatrick Sale gives this account of the meaning of Bioregion:

"There is nothing so mysterious about the elements of the word, after all — 'bio' is from the Greek word for forms of life, as in 'biology' and 'biography', and 'region' is from the Latin 'regere', territory to be ruled — and there is nothing, after a moment's thought, so terribly difficult in what they convey together: a life-territory, a place defined by its life forms, its topography and its biota, rather than by human dictates; a region governed by nature, not legislature. And if the concept initially strikes us as strange, that may perhaps only be a measure of how distant we have become from the wisdom it conveys — and how badly we need that wisdom now.

"There is another reason for using this word. Since it was first propagated by writer Peter Berg and ecologist Raymond Dasmann more than a decade ago — it is not quite clear who originated the term, but it was these two, working through an organization called Planet Drum and a newspaper irreverently called 'Raise the Stakes', who brought the concept to a wider audience — it has inspired what can fairly be called a movement, albeit still a modest one. As of 1985 there were some sixty groups in North America specifically defining themselves as bioregional, and a nascent continental organization, the North American Bioregional Congress, formed to advance bioregional consciousness and to nurture and link bioregional organizations. These developments give the word a sufficient lineage, a sufficient currency, to justify its being honored by further usage."

This book by Sale is a good one to read for realizing the extent to which this positive conception of post-national consciousness is now in the air. There is an excellent bibliography of primary sources for further reading. For those who share the view of the contemporary professor that "nationality today is almost a synonym for moral purposelessness," the following by Sale will be of interest:

"The bioregional project also takes force from the fact that it can be begun locally, with just a few people willing to study a little, talk a little, imagine a little, organize a little. As its perceptions are regional, so is its canvas, and thus the energies for its launching do not have to be very exhaustive and the resources to keep it moving do not have to be very extensive.

"All too many contemporary political schemes try to take aim at the national government — running people for Congress, or nominating one of their own for the Presidency, or creating caucuses in a national party, or setting up lobbies in Washington, or organizing constituencies on a national scale. The efforts are not always useless, but they are far more often symbolic than substantive, and they always entail a great expenditure of money and energy for no very certain or enduring return. Or worse: they discover that it is impossible finally to change the entrenched Federal bureaucracy or the unresponsive Federal administration....

"What makes the bioregional effort different — in any foreseeable future, anyway — is that it asks nothing of the Federal government and needs no national legislation, no governmental regulation, no Presidential dispensation. What commends it especially to its age is that it does not need any Federal presence to promote it, only a Federal obliviousness to permit it. In that respect it is very much in tune with that basic American spirit once described by Thoreau:

"The government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of the way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way."

To Thoreau Kirkpatrick Sale adds: "Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves. Take care of the communities, develop in regions, tap the local manifestations of 'the character inherent in the American people', and the Federal structure can become quite irrelevant."

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