1 Enough is enough?

Re-imagining an ethics and aesthetics of sustainability for the twenty-first century

Lawrence Buell

'Sustainability' and 'the good life' are both very elastic terms—so elastic as to raise suspicions of bad faith. On one hand, what many consider the 'good life' is ecologically unsustainable. On the other hand, 'sustainability' has a bad history of being co-opted as a euphemism in order to justify a degree of economic development only a little less bad than worst-case exploitation. Such has been the ambiguous legacy of the landmark 1987 Brundtland report, Our Common Future, as the eminent Norwegian environmental philosopher and activist Arne Naess (2008:294–297) was one of the first to foresee. If we hope to be good earth citizens, then we must narrow down what counts as the good life to practices that would enable and further ecological sustainability and narrow down 'sustainability' to mean an order of existence better than the status quo: one that would conduce to and insofar as possible optimize the flourishing of human beings together with that of nonhuman life and planetary health generally. Naess's admonition could not be more telling: 'a development is ecologically sustainable if and only if there is a long-term trend that ensures, or that may justifiably be considered to ensure, ecological sustainability' (2008:298).

Within these normative bounds I shall venture some reflections about 'enoughness', both at the level of personal ethics and at various social levels. Given the nature of the subject, this discussion will perform be more exploratory than prescriptive and more idealistic than pragmatic, suggesting pathways far easier to commend in principle than to realize in practice. As I do, readers will quickly perceive my disciplinary bias as an environmental humanist, a bias that I seek to turn to advantage here, however. For I maintain that literature and other expressive arts—by reason of their power to rivet attention and to motivate through narrative, image, and symbol—have a much more significant role to play in identifying and combatting today's environmental crises than is usually recognized.

The impediments to bridging the gap between notional value and behavioural practice begin with the divergences in understanding of 'enoughness' among persons and across societies and historical epochs. These differences in turn are influenced by judgement calls about many specific ethico-environmental factors such as proper standard of living, proper balance of work and leisure, level of resource consumption possible without exhausting supply, and so on.
It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find philosophers drawing the line very differently when defining the standard of material enoughness necessary to the good life. In Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, the good life — for male citizens, that is — presupposes a certain sufficiency, a certain surplus of assets; because, he writes, ‘it is impossible or at least not easy to perform noble actions if one lacks the wherewithal’ (1962:21; 1.1099a). Whereas for the Stoic Epictetus the proper ‘measure of possession’ is minimum bodily need; ‘If you go beyond its fitness to the foot’, he warns, the shoe ‘comes first to be gilded, then purple, then studded with jewels. For to that which once exceeds the fit measure there is no limit’ (1944:347).

In modernity, the dominant tendency has of course not only been more Aristotelian than Stoic but also to go far beyond the moderation Aristotle elsewhere counsels. ‘What is “enough”?’ asks E. F. Schumacher in Small is Beautiful:

Who can tell us? Certainly not the economist who pursues “economic growth” as the highest of all values, and therefore has no concept of “enough.” There are poor societies which have too little; but where is the rich country that says: “Halt! We have enough?” There is none.

(1973:25)

Schumacher wrote those words 40 years ago, and they are even truer today. No rich country, indeed only one country worldwide, meets the UN Human Development Index’s criteria for both sufficient human well-being and sufficiently light ‘ecological footprint’: Cuba.²

Not that the wealthy countries of the world should rush to imitate the Cubans. The point is simply that the world at large has a grave ethics of sustainability problem. In a thoughtful assessment of the ethics of enoughness at the personal level, Robert and Edward Sidalsky — a British father-son team of economist and philosopher — make the same claim about intrinsic human nature that Schumacher makes about societies. Human ‘material wants know no natural bounds;’ they will expand without end unless we consciously restrain them’ (2012:69).

The Sidalskys are too anthropocentric to say anything very useful about environmental ethics per se. But that does not lessen the relevance for our purposes of their historical diagnosis that the inherent human susceptibility to immoderation has been aggravated in modernity. As they see it, a crucial unintended consequence of scientific and industrial revolution was an ethical paradigm shift. During the nineteenth century, they argue, this led to a fetishization of economic growth that still persists as the key measure of social well-being and, concomitantly, to the displacement of traditional sufficiency-based models of the good life by an ethos of ceaseless striving after progress and improvement.

Against this, the Sidalskys offer a counter-model to the bad ethics of progress-first: seven basic requisites of the good life, in the following order of importance: health, security, respect, personality (that is, a sense of inward freedom), ‘harmony with nature’, ‘friendship’ and ‘leisure’ (ibid.:165). This recipe of ingredients is
certainly worth consideration. My chief interest here, however, is not in such ‘bottom-line’ seven-step solutions, but in frameworks and fundamentals. For an environmental humanist, the importance of Small is Beautiful and How Much is Enough? lies especially in the failure of modern ethical imagination, individual and collective, that they both describe. This failure requires value transformations on three interlocking levels, which if seriously undertaken by a critical mass of people might bring about all else. These are voluntary simplicity at the individual level, bioregional mindfulness at the subnational level and ecosocial equity at the national and international levels. In what follows, I shall take up each in turn.

Voluntary simplicity

The question of enoughness arguably starts with individual persons, especially those with the freedom and means to make discretionary choices. If a large number of well-off people, in the rich world especially, made a concerted effort to consume less and manage with less stuff, planetary health would surely benefit.

Voluntary simplicity (VS) is an ethos towards which many more are attracted than can justly boast of having achieved, however. I cannot deny living in a single-family home in a prosperous suburb, notwithstanding the distinct remembrance of passionately agreeing with my best friend in youth that the curse of life was superfluous property. But I take consolation knowing I am not alone. The prominent American poet-essayist and agricultural reformer, Wendell Berry, rightly insists that: ‘A protest meeting on the issue of environmental abuse is... a convocation of the guilty’. (1972:74). The protesters themselves are inevitably more or less complicit in the wrongs they decry. So too with a forum on VS at a Western research university. Many, if not most, of the participants who are sympathetic to the VS as an ideal are likely to prove reluctant, when put to the test, to adjust their lifestyles more than a limited degree in accordance with it. In a late 1990s poll of American attitudes towards materialism, 83 percent of those responding agreed that the US consumes too much and a still higher percentage agreed that ‘protecting the environment will require “major changes in the way we live”’, but only 28 percent claimed they themselves had voluntarily made lifestyle changes in accordance within the past five years (UNEP). I suspect that the same poll would yield quite similar results today. Such has long been the nature of what might be called ‘environmental doublethink’.

A certain slippage between professed values and behaviour is only to be expected. Such has no doubt been the case universally and for all time. The prophets of the great world religions stood for a degree of self-restraint that institutionalized Confucianism, Christianity and Buddhism have never matched. In the secular arena, US history offers perhaps a particularly egregious case insofar as American promise has for centuries been linked both to striking it rich and to the dream of a purified social order. As the American historian David Shi writes, the dream of the simple life – Puritan, Quaker, Shaker, Transcendentalist, etc. – took hold in early colonial times and remains deeply embedded in national culture, but it also has a way of ‘becoming enmeshed in its opposite’ even while
serving ‘as the nation’s conscience’, and ‘thereby providing a vivifying counterpoint to the excesses of materialist individualism’. ‘The simple life’, he predicts, ‘will persist both as an enduring myth and as an actual way of living’ (1985: 277–279), but with no guarantee that any one movement will endure for long.

Indeed, there is good reason to worry about worsening trend lines in the contemporary US, of accelerated techno-social change depleting planetary natural resources and a widening gap between haves and have-nots. These have been aggravated by the entrenchment of the conjoined assumptions that economic growth is the key to well-being and that mass consumption is crucial to that growth process. The ‘Consumer Republic’, as historian Lizbeth Cohen aptly calls the American variant of that persuasion, seems actually to have been born during the Great Depression, although it did not really take off until the broad-based boom in national prosperity after World War II, which devastated the economies of all other major world powers and put the US in a uniquely advantageous competitive position for the next several decades. The consumer republic ‘promised the socially progressive end of economic equality’ (Cohen 2003:118) — unfortunately without establishing adequate ‘means of redistributing existing wealth’ (ibid.:129), the temporizing argument among policy-makers and legislators being that ‘an ever growing economy built around the dynamics of increased productivity and mass purchasing power would expand the overall pie without reducing the size of any of the portions’ (ibid.:401). Although this grand vision looks less credible today, Cohen rightly points out that ‘patriotic shopping’ continues to get held up in the twenty-first century as a distraction from foreign wars and as a remedy for recessions, despite recurring worry that the US and many European countries are spending beyond their means.

Meanwhile, however, the valuation of economic prosperity itself as a measure of well-being has been increasingly questioned by economists and psychologists as well as ethicists. Does more money really make people happier? The unsurprising answer seems to be that although every society’s haves are happier than its have-nots, ‘extra income increases happiness less and less as people get richer’ (Layard 2005:230). On a 2005 life-satisfaction poll, the cohort of Forbes richest Americans rated only slightly above groups of ‘Traditional Masai’ tribesmen and of Pennsylvania Amish farming communities (cf. Biswas-Diener 2008:314). That the Masai and the Amish, whose ecological footprints are so much smaller than the billionaires, claim to feel so good — relatively speaking — seems a strong prima facie argument for simplicity as a corrective to the prodigalities of affluence.

VS as a self-conscious persuasion by that name, arose in the US as a counterweight to the Consumer Republic idea. Social philosopher Richard Gregg, a Gandhi admirer and nonviolence advocate, coined the term in a 1936 pamphlet written, he wrote, against ‘Henry Ford’s idea that civilization progresses by the increase in the number of people’s desires and their satisfaction’. (1936:4–5). Gregg would keep consumption within bounds by propagating an ethic of ‘singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within [and] avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life’ (ibid.:25).
Gregg knew that he did not invent the ethic he describes. He cites many precedents ancient and modern – Moses, Buddha and Gandhi among them. Of the American precursor whom Gandhi himself would have cited, however, Gregg curiously makes no mention: Henry David Thoreau. That Thoreau could matter much more to Gandhi than to Gandhi’s disciple Gregg can ironically be traced to Thoreau’s own mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson. In late Victorian Britain, admiration for Thoreau as a progressive thinker in matters of politics, diet and general lifestyle was nurtured by the radical intelligentsia whom the young Gandhi met there, whereas the stateside vision of Thoreau that dominated until the mid-twentieth century was the image made famous by Emerson’s remembrance of him as a standoffish person who could be admired only with a shudder, because ‘the severity of his ideal interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society’ (1903:4479).

What this image blocks out is restored by sociologist Robert Wuthnow’s enlistment of Thoreau in a perceptive book about traditions of moral restraint embedded in the American version of the Protestant work ethic. Wuthnow distinguishes two such strands, which he calls ‘ascetic moralism’ and ‘expressive moralism’ (1996:340). Both, he rightly claims, still persist, although in attenuated form. The first operates according to a ‘fixed set of morally prescribed rules of behavior’ (ibid.:72) that regulate it. The second operates from the quest for modes of work fulfilling to the spirit. Wuthnow classifies Thoreau as a type-two expressive moralist.

Emerson of course knew Thoreau intimately and Wuthnow only through his writings. But Wuthnow is the better guide to the spirit of Thoreau’s Walden (1971[1854]) – his most influential book, and today a classic of American literature well-known worldwide. This philosophical reminiscence of the author’s two-year homesteading experiment sets forth its programme of simplifying the terms of existence to the bare essentials, not as austerity for its own sake but to optimize the possibility of human flourishing. Thoreau seeks to persuade us that to ‘sustain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely’ (1971[1854]:70). Even more fundamental than his dictum ‘simplify, simplify, simplify’ is what he calls living ‘deliberately’. By this Thoreau means a slowing-down of the tempo of life to the point that mind and senses become attuned to extract the maximum of aesthetic pleasure and heightened consciousness from each moment, from sunrise to sunset and beyond, so that even the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn when I was sitting with doors and windows open’ (ibid.:89–90) finds its place in a ritual of awakening experienced as intensely meaningful. Countless touches of this kind make Walden a testament to the pleasures of what today American gurus and bloggers on VS call ‘downshifting’.

A better example from Thoreau’s day of ‘ascetic moralism’ is a book about to go into its 33rd printing as Walden went to press: a tract called The American Frugal Housewife, by Lydia Maria Child (1835). It too is much admired today in American VS circles, rivalling even Walden. The two books resemble each other in their vigilant attachment to small things and overlooked
moments in daily life. But Child prizes frugality as an ethical goal in itself rather than as a pathway to intellectual or aesthetic refinement, declaring at the outset:

Nothing should be thrown away so long as it is possible to make any use of it, however trifling that use may be; and whatever the size of a family, every member should be employed either in earning or saving money.

(1835:3)

The justification of thrift, efficiency and living simply is that it’s the right way to be.

But is VS of either kind still possible in the urbanized, high-tech world of today? Yes it is. Here are two examples, one ascetic and the other expressive. In 1977, former professor Charles Gray decided at the age of 52 that the ‘crisis of late Twentieth century humanity’ demanded that he live within what he considered the ‘World Equity Budget’ – that is, his proportional share of the world’s total [dollar] income – which he reckoned to be $142 per month (Gray 1995:98–100). That demanded a far more drastic lifestyle change than anything Thoreau or Child underwent. It immediately cost him his marriage and plunged him into loneliness and depression until he found ways to adjust. But he kept to it at least until the time of his writing nearly 20 years later.

A less drastic but equally suggestive case is written up in Colin Beavan’s book No Impact Man (2009; see also his blog, Beavan n.d.). A couple in their early forties with an infant daughter commit to a one-year experiment in incremental downscaling from their NYC apartment base: first take the stairs, not the elevator, and walk everywhere rather than drive or ride; then reduce trash to zero including no more Styrofoam and disposable diapers; then eat only food as local as possible, grown within 250 miles at most; then reduce electricity use to the bare minimum and depend as much as possible on a rooftop solar energy device. Although sometimes annoyingly self-promotional, Beavan delivers in the long run a persuasive account of eco-responsible negotiation of metropolitan living – and how his family of three found new and unexpected satisfactions from that experience.

More questionable about VS initiatives of whatever kind than feasibility is how far they go towards addressing large-scale problems of overconsumption and maldistribution of the resources. The personal-integrity-first approach more or less endemic to VS ethics is a particularly problematic roadblock. Thoreau’s great political essay ‘Civil Disobedience’ praising heroic individual acts of conscience in disentangling the self from the state; but it took Gandhi and Martin Luther King to convert that vision into a movement. To be sure, some personal initiatives do have potential for immediate broader social impact – like Austrian millionaire Karl Rabeder’s 2010 commitment to donate his whole fortune to a microcredit nonprofit for small entrepreneurs in Latin America and ‘move into a small wooden hut in the mountains or a studio in Innsbruck’ (Neilan 2010). Far less dramatic but potentially even more important if practiced on a large scale would be some version of the kind of voluntary transference of wealth proposed by philosopher Peter Singer:
that anyone who has enough money to spend on the luxuries and frivolties so common in affluent societies should give at least 1 cent in every dollar of their income to those who have trouble getting enough to eat, clean water to drink, shelter from the elements, and basic health care.

(2002:194)

Indeed, Singer’s proposed voluntarism (uncharacteristically for that notoriously pugnacious advocate of animal rights) is arguably much more modest than it needs or deserves to be. I suspect that few, if any, in the top 5–10 per cent income bracket of household income worldwide would find it much of a sacrifice to donate to the purposes Singer itemizes an amount at least equal to that which they spend on all forms of entertainment annually – recreational travel, artistic and sports events, restaurant meals, etc.

Still, it remains a serious question whether philanthropy or even significant personal economic sacrifice at the individual level stands a chance of making a more than modest contribution towards remediation of today’s crises of global inequity and environmental sustainability. As the French philosopher Michel Serres observes in another context, generally if not invariably individual action ‘has as much effect on the world as a butterfly in the Australian desert’ – that is, ‘except for the rarest of exceptions – nil’ (1995:19).

Altogether, then, VS seems a necessary but insufficient constituent of a robust enoughness ethics, especially given the social pressures exerted upon the lone individual anywhere. Differential of socialization doubtless goes a long way towards explaining not only first-world habits of overconsumption but also why the Masai and the Amish are so content. We also need feasible alternative models for collective sustainable living above and beyond individually chosen redirections of lifestyle.

Place-based communities, utopian or otherwise, that attempt to subsist within the ecological constraints of the spaces they occupy are perhaps the most obvious place to look. One example of a fairly large and growing initiative of this kind in contemporary times is the movement known in North America as bioregionalism.

Bioregionalism

Bioregionalism potentially corrects against VS’s person-first emphasis by conceiving individuals as embedded within mutually cooperating communities that hope to sustain themselves through time insofar as possible in deference to the ecological limits of their physical environments.7 ‘A fully developed bioregionalism’, as one representative assessment puts it, ‘favours a planetary diversity of place-based bioregional economics conservatively and carefully producing and consuming primarily for their own populations’ needs’, with ‘local communities of place . . . networked at broader geographical scales from the local watershed and larger regional watersheds to the continental scale’ (Carr 2004:3, 49). As this latter stipulation suggests, the geographical dimensions of a bioregion are seen as being set on the one hand ecosystemically by ‘natural’ boundaries like watersheds
or drainage basins and on the other hand by the collective memory of the inhabitants, rather than by cartographic or jurisdictional fact. In principle, then, they are defined more from the ground up than the top down. As such, bioregions are both natural and cultural constructs, inasmuch as place-attachment presupposes a fusion of physiographic givens and communal experience.

The term bioregionalism dates only from the 1970s. Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), a futuristic novel that presupposes the secession of the Pacific region north of San Francisco to Washington from the rest of the US, was perhaps the most attention-getting expression of its spirit at the time. But as with VS, bioregionalism's underlying vision has much older and more eclectic roots. To a considerable extent it boils down to an updated, more environmental sustainability conscious attempt to recuperate selected now-endangered traits of preindustrial society and economy – e.g. continuity of life in place, local self-sufficiency, and communal interdependence – such that one finds a considerable degree of resonance between North American-style formulations of bioregionalism and semi-idealized recollection of the dispensation of premodern land-based solidarity in urbanized and urbanizing societies everywhere, from Norway to China. The writings of the two most prominent advocates among senior American bioregional literati bear this out: sustainable agriculture advocate Wendell Berry and poet-critic Gary Snyder.

Berry's many books trace bioregional ethics back through cultural history from the grasp of local knowledge shown by the self-sufficient religiocentric agrarian communities scattered throughout his part of the American Midwest, to nineteenth-century Anglo-European provincial writers like Thomas Hardy (whose country of the imagination was the author's home district of southwest England), to Thomas Jefferson's vision of the US as a nation of self-sufficient small farmers, to the georgic tradition that dates to classical antiquity. For Snyder, the compelling precedents are non-Western: classical Chinese and Japanese sages of Taoism and Zen, and Native American placed-based culture-ways. Roughly speaking, Snyder leans towards Wuthnow's 'expressive' pole, celebrating the cultural/aesthetic richness of multi-ethnic citizenship within the watershed, whereas Berry leans towards the 'ascetic' pole, piously reminding his audiences of the need for the 'little economy' of secular human life to conform itself to the 'Great' economy, meaning for him the principles of ecological sustainability that to him are nothing less than the outward and visible manifestation of the law of God (1987:54–75).  

In all versions of bioregionalism, personhood is conceived socially rather than atomistically; the claims of collective life in place take precedence over individual desires. And in most versions, productive labour that involves intimate interaction with the material environment – farming, subsistence hunting, building – is accorded higher intrinsic value than for VS ethics. For some, specifically ecological labour is the core vision, as with Wes Jackson's Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, which seeks 'to develop an agricultural system with the ecological stability of the prairie and a grain yield comparable to [conventionally-grown] annual crops' (Land Institute n.d.).
Where bioregionalism and VS converge is their shared understanding of sustenance worthy of the name as furthered rather than compromised by conscienceful restraint. As Berry puts it, communitarian, place-based stewardship asks us ‘to . . . need less, to care more for the needs of others. We must understand what the health of the earth requires, and we must put that before all other needs’ (1977:65–66). The result, he insists, will be ‘poorer in luxuries . . . but . . . richer in meaning and more abundant in real pleasure’ (1972:81).

Without doubt, as he argues, committed communities of more or less equal small-scale stakeholders with eco-savvy local knowledge leading prudent, temperate lives are likely to do less environmental damage, raise more healthier locally grown food at lower per capita cost, and deliver more forms of social sustenance too than the national average at less than average cost.

For reasons easy to surmise, the aspect of bioregional thinking that has had by far the greatest appeal to date is its vision of foodway reform, in particular the value it sets on producing and consuming nutritious food grown locally and Insofar as possible without agro-chemicals. The majority of urbanites and suburbanites, who are probably also the principal consumers of bioregional writing, do not seriously want to relocate to small self-contained communities beyond convenient reach of metropolitan areas. Nor do they want to practise economic self-sufficiency beyond a limited degree when push comes to shove. But everyone must eat, and almost everyone is attracted to the idea of a healthy, nutritious diet; and many enjoy growing at least some of what they eat. Hence, for example, the enormous popularity of the novelist Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle (2007), a lively and genially contentious bioregional memoir of the author’s and her family’s first ‘locavore year’ of living in a small rural community near the part of Appalachia where she grew up. The book chronicles—with many tasty-sounding recipes along the way—their conscienceful effort to avoid all kitchen-table and restaurant food grown by CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and chemical-intensive methods of fertilization, and to subsist on produce grown or raised nearby, depending insofar as possible on their own garden and livestock.

In these ways, Animal, Vegetable, Miracle fuses the most appealing features of bioregional and VS thinking into an eminently readable, aesthetically engaging narrative manifesto. Whatever the book’s actual influence upon the hearts and minds of its readers, furthermore, it’s unquestionably a barometer of an auspicious broader trend-line in national culture and behaviour during the last quarter-century. As the author puts it towards the close, ‘when our family gave up meat from CAFOs’ in the 1990s, ‘that choice was synonymous with becoming a vegetarian. No real alternatives existed. Now they do’ (2007:228), – in supermarkets as well as country-town farmer’s markets. In other words, even though bioregional ethics and aesthetics have clearly not (yet) succeeded in transforming North American residential patterns or even in bringing about a major resurgence of small-scale earth-friendly agricultural practices, the increasing number of available consumer options and the increasing consumer demand for fresher, more locally grown food bespeaks a significant resonance between bioregionalist
thinking and public sentiment at large – in this particular sector at least. Beavan’s *No Impact Man*, discussed earlier, attests to this as well.

The fact that bioregionalism’s greatest success to date lies in its point of greatest appeal to middle-class consumerism also points to inherent vulnerabilities that threaten to limit, if not altogether disable, its efficacy as a programme for a more environmentally sustainable society. These include nostalgia for organic communities of bygone days that may never actually have existed in the form imagined and downplaying the systemic hazards of provincialism, xenophobia and hierarchicalism that can overtake place-based communities in practice. With such thoughts in mind, my fellow ecocritic Ursula Heise, in her important *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, critiques what she sees as the overprivileging of place-attachment in earlier-stage ecocritical work as inadequate for today’s world, in which local communities are increasingly networked globally and the defining environmental crises – pollution, global warming and species extinction – are planetary in reach (2008:28–62 and passim). My gentler concuring judgement is that bioregionalism potentially serves important purposes, both social and ecological, but that enoughness ethics most definitely needs to be conceived and implemented on a much larger social scale in order to stand a chance of making a difference outside scattered pocket cultures or companies of the faithful.

Relatedly, and no less seriously, as one of its advocates candidly admits, ‘the bioregional movement does not have a worked-out strategy on what to do about the corporate sector’ (Carr 2004:301). Although VS and bioregionalism both run counter to the institutions and culture of global capitalism – the primary threat to environmental sustainability – their proclivity is rather to opt out of the socioeconomic mainstream than to urge a comprehensive dismantling or, when they do, to propose a counter-model that would seem workable for an increasingly networked world only at the social margins. For VS this is only to be expected, given its micro-scale commitment to begin with, the preeminent importance it attaches to individual choice. As for bioregionalism, although its commitment to social as against purely individual reform makes it more dispositionally hostile to systemic capitalism, its commitment to restoring local autonomy inhibits it from advocating ‘radical restructuring of current social arrangements’, such as a centrally mandated ‘redistribution of wealth’ (Evanoff 2011:149).

Any such project of course poses a far more formidable challenge than formation of communal solidarity at the comparatively small-scale levels envisaged by Berry, Snyder and Kingsolver. Political theorist Robyn Eckersley, hopeful as she strives to be in articulating a better pathway for sustainability for national and world governance than the best model currently on offer – namely, sustainable development or ‘ecological modernization’ ushered in by the Brundtland report – feels obliged to concede that ‘the project of building the green state of the kind I have defended can never be finalized’ (2004:169).” That too, I suppose, is why Arne Næss declared himself an optimist for the twenty-second century, not the twenty-first (2008:308).
Ecosocial equity

Earlier I mentioned studies of reported well-being by income level across cultures. Of special interest for its conspectus of such work is Richard Wilkinson’s and Kate Pickett’s *The Spirit Level* (2010), a synthesis by two epidemiologists of research in many disciplines and numerous governmental and NGO reports. These studies demonstrate, the authors argue, that nations in the developed world with the greatest income disparity between the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent fare significantly less well according to a wide range of well-being indicators: such as mental health and drug use, obesity, teenage births, violence, incarceration rates, social mobility and reported levels of trust in the integrity of other people. Japan and the Scandinavian countries come out best; the US, Singapore and Portugal worst—a provocative triad. The authors make a point of stressing that no one story-line can explain the variation in top–bottom polarization, including what would seem the most likely explanation *prima facie*: public expenditure on social welfare as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, on which Japan (for instance) ranks near the bottom. ‘How a society becomes more equal’, they claim, ‘is less important than whether or not it actually does so’ (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010:177).

At many points the data and inferences can be questioned; but *The Spirit Level*’s big claim seems persuasive, including the sub-claim of the ‘Equality and Sustainability’ chapter: that greater inequality increases ‘pressure to consume’ (ibid.:208) and the percentage of unrecycled waste. If so, then some of bioregionalism’s precepts would seem to make for better outcomes at a pan-national level too. If Wilkinson and Pickett are right, equality of condition correlates with social cohesion, a broad-based sense of socio-environmental accountability and interdependence, personal moderation and inclination to environmental thrift.

But to what extent dare we expect large-scale behavioural shifts of such kind on a national scale, let alone international? Here ethical and political will lag far behind the resources of ethical and aesthetic imagination.

To be sure, even in the US, where economic inequalities between top and bottom are now the most extreme in the entire rich world next to Singapore, there is a long and strong history of egalitarianism despite the more libertarian understanding that now prevails of our Declaration of Independence’s proclamation of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ as fundamental human rights. So, for example, the state of New Hampshire, whose automobile license plate bears the motto ‘Live Free or Die’, also ranks according to Wilkinson and Pickett as one of three or four among the 50 states with the smallest gap between the top and bottom 20 per cent. Jefferson’s agrarian vision of a nation of moderately prosperous small farmers; Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation of neighbourly cooperation on the frontier in *Democracy in America*; our national poet Walt Whitman curbing the potential self-aggrandizement of his poetic persona by insisting ‘By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms’ (2002:46); the Homestead Act of 1862 that made available generous-sized equal parcels of the vast public lands in the
mid-continent and west for would-be settlers—these are a few notable expressions of the same kind.

In US literary history, the most striking embodiment of this cast of thinking is Edward Bellamy’s late-nineteenth-century utopian novel Looking Backward: 2000–1887 (2007), an international best-seller among whose distinctions was to become the first work of American literature translated into Chinese. Bellamy wrote it in the midst of a techno-economic boom the likes of which the world had never seen, which transformed the US into the world’s leading industrial as well as agricultural powerhouse by 1900—a transformation surpassed in scale and rapidity only by contemporary China. The telephone, the elevator, the electric light had all been invented the decade before. But no less was this a time of social upheaval, of stark economic polarization and intensified class conflict: rampant capitalism versus insurgent labour. Looking Backward’s vision of a future America transformed into an egalitarian utopia after somehow getting past this crisis reads like a preparatory script for The Spirit Level, except for its explicitly socialist solution, whereas Wilkinson and Pickett studiously refrain from favouring any specific type of regime.

In Bellamy’s imagined year 2000, education is universal; everyone works, both women and men, though only for a stipulated number of years and never to excess; and every job is equally honoured, with a system of proportional remuneration that minimizes extremes at both ends, that scrupulously matches talent to role, that calibrates supply to demand. Money has been replaced by a system of annually renewed individual credit cards that expire at death. An ethic of enoughness prevails because ostentation is shorn; efficiency is optimized and the system guarantees more or less the same sustenance for all. What’s enabled all this is the displacement of the ideology of possessive individualism by one of interdependent egalitarian cooperation that sets supreme value on minimizing the gap between haves and have-nots. Of course the great mystery is how so amazing a transformation could have happened. Nearly to the same extent as The Spirit Level, Looking Backward emphasizes the ‘is’ rather than the ‘how’, except for a few hasty generalizations about worsening capital-labour antagonism becoming so dreadful as to produce a massive ethical paradigm shift leading in turn to peaceable, consensual evolution of this radically different social order.

Ironically, the early twenty-first century US has seen almost the opposite outcome from the New Jerusalem of Looking Backward, so far at least: a new Gilded Age with a ‘growing inequality crisis’ (Noah 2012) redressed only in part by 2013 tax law changes, with the top tier benefitting disproportionately during the past several decades from lower rates of taxation than during the mid-twentieth century, financial deregulation and economic globalization.10 This repolarization of privileged versus disprivileged mirrors the gap between the global North and global South at the planetary level. That in turn has generated or reinforced polarized conceptions (or assumptions) about what counts as requisite human needs. The relatively well-off form exaggerated images of their material needs even as the world’s disprivileged risk being denied what in former times would have been considered universal sustenance entitlements, as with the trend
towards commodification of water resources such that more poor, place-based people are going thirsty or malnourished.

All that helps explain why the most dynamic push today in environment-and-literature studies, my own disciplinary home base, is so-called environmental justice (EJ) literature has come into view, including such works as Michiko Ishimure's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (1969), Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995), Helen Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), Sandra Steingraeber's *Living Downstream* (1997), Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2003), Rong Jiang (Lü Jiamin)'s *Wolf Totem* (2004), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). At the risk of oversimplifying so diverse a group of works, one can nonetheless usefully see them all as more or less sharing the following emphases. First, they testify to the sharply unequal distribution of environmental benefits and risks across different population groups. Second, they are witness to land degradation and/or the imperilment of nonhuman species and/or habitat loss by dominant national and transnational regimes, both political and economic. Third, and as a consequence, they dramatize the dire long-run consequences of bad ecological stewardship, potentially resulting in the 'revenge of Gaia' as James Lovelock (2006) calls it: whether it be the desertification of inner Mongolia owing to destruction of the traditional grasslands herding economy (*Wolf Totem*), devastation of First Peoples' lands in northern Canada by timber and hydropower interests (*Solar Storms*), or the devastation of the ecosystem and ecosystem-dependent people of the Delta region of the Bay of Bengal by forms of encroachment that disregard local knowledge (*Hungry Tide*).

To some extent, EJ literature is open to the same charge of provincialism to which, as we've seen, bioregionalism is vulnerable. Marxist geographer David Harvey's assessment of the characteristic limitation of EJ agendas broadly applies to both forms of counter-hegemonic of insurgency:

as a movement embedded in multiple "militant particularisms," it has [yet] to find a way to cross that problematic divide between action that is deeply embedded in place, in local experience, power conditions and social relations to a much more general movement

(1996:399)

that would 'transform the processes that gave rise to the problem in the first place' (ibid.:401). Harvey might plausibly contend that Viramontes' scenario of an extended family of Hispanic agricultural workers condemned to suffer horribly without prospect of relief is nothing more than a mirror image of the apocalyptic denouement of *Carpentaria*, in which Will Phantom and his band of aboriginal guerillas (aided by a monster typhoon) succeed in destroying a northern
Australian mining enterprise and its enclave of racist white settlers. For the emphases of both novels is on misery from or recourse against predatory master-class-dominated capitalist institutions operating at this or that ethno-regional level rather than on dismantling the underlying systemic inequities that produced the pathologies of ethnic and economic stratification to begin with.

Likewise, in *Heart of Redness* the plot turns on disputes within a poor South African coastal community, aggravated by ancient tribal feuds, over whether to recoup itself by accepting transformation into an ecotouristical playground. Although the novel deploys satire with considerable success to keep sentimental melodrama at arm’s length, the community’s eventual decision to opt instead to develop itself as an enterprise zone based on uniquely local crafts and materials amounts to a somewhat wishful romanticization of local empowerment defying vested interests. By contrast, *Wolf Totem* – which focuses on the losing battle of isolated bands of inner Mongolian herders to maintain their traditional way of life as the grasslands becomes appropriated for central government-sponsored agro-expansion certain to ruin the land – delivers a more pointed indictment of the folly of ecologically insouciant top-down Maoist social engineering – but, again, without envisaging any alternative path except for the one that’s clearly no longer possible, of leaving the grasslands intact.

But just how culpable are such limitations, really? Can works of environmental imagination, whether of literature or of any other expressive genre, be fairly judged by the standard of whether they do or do not spell out a coherent, articulated conception of an alternative socio-economic order to the bad status quo they critique? Surely diagnostic prescriptivism of this kind is more the province of social theory than of the thought experiments of the creative arts.¹² That is not to say that the expressive arts are any less important forms of social intervention, only to point towards the distinctive kinds of contribution they stand to make to that end. In particular: affect, which is potentially one of literature’s strongest suits, is as ecocritic Heather Houser declares, ‘central to whether action flourishes or withers’ (2014: 18). The very recalcitrance of global problems of the first magnitude to clear-cut programmatic solutions arguably makes it all the more so. As Houser elaborates: affect is pivotal to the complexity of emergent concerns about climate change, species extinction, pervasive toxicity, population growth, capitalist expansion, and technoscientific innovation’ (ibid.:8) – the whole menu of today’s preeminent environmental(ist) challenges.

For our purposes, what more specifically is most worthy and notable above all about literature’s cultural work is its prevailing aesthetic of frustrated vexation dramatized by scenarios that probe the confusions, impediments and complexities that stand in the way of fulfilment of Eckersley’s key prerequisite for an ecologically responsive democratic order worthy of the name: that ‘the demos’ must be re-understood

as the affected community or [transnational] community at risk, tied together not by common passports, nationality, blood line, ethnicity, or religion but
by the potential to be harmed by the particular proposal, and not necessarily all in the same way or to the same degree.

(2004:113)

This the narratives just named all do by conjuring up images of ecologically endangered little people the world has overlooked, seen through the eyes of more cosmopolitan observers (narrators or other proxy characters) who find themselves involved, identifying with and experiencing and indeed suffering from their pain. As with bioregionalism at its most expansive, all these texts concentrate in the first instance on dramatizing local conditions in remote districts scantily understood if ever noticed at all by their cosmopolitan, metro-centric target audiences; but they do so in such a way as also to dramatize their enmeshment within larger ecological, economic and ethno-racial forces that are ultimately planetary in scope.

In its prioritization of human communities at risk, EJ imagination predictably distributes its attention and its sympathies somewhat asymmetrically between human and the nonhuman. The underlying ideology of EJ literature is not ‘deep ecology’ as Naess generally defined it: i.e. the conviction ‘that all living creatures have their own intrinsic value . . . irrespective of the use they might have for mankind’ (Naess and Haukeland 2002: 6). Only intermittently and secondarily is the thrust of the aforementioned narratives biocentric. Ecosystemic degradation is seen as subsidiary to human immiseration. The sense of the humanitarian emergency predominates. But they also lean somewhat in that other direction by dramatizing the plight of ‘ecosystem people’, as Indian environmental historians Mahdy Gadjil and Ramachandra Guha call them. In the process, they thereby define the human being itself as effectively ‘transcorporeal’ (1995:4), as inseparable from the material environment that humans inhabit and must navigate.11 Human flourishing is tied inextricably to ecosystemic health, or degradation. The implication is always that social and environmental inequalities are inextricably conjoined.

Altogether, then, the literature – perhaps one should rather say ‘literatures’ – of EJ showcase the cultural work that aesthetic texts can perform at a time of ecological crises of planetary scale. They give visibility and voice to overlooked communities of risk, including at least implicitly if not explicitly the other-than-human: to the endangered plants or mammals that might nonetheless be keystone species for whole ecosystems, aboriginal pocket cultures, slum dwellers in the megacities of the global South and in marginalized communities within the rich world that (as Wendell Berry has often pointed out) might just as well be the Third World. Such interventions obviously are not the only path to awakening public conscience. But neither can one set an outer limit to the catalytic power of aesthetic affect to effect changes in the actual world.
Concluding thoughts

The recognition that a ‘good life’ worthy of the name requires redirecting the behaviour and lifestyle of twenty-first century humans towards a more environmentally sustainable and socio-economically equitable path is almost certainly shared by a large number, and very likely a majority, of affluent persons today worldwide, especially in the world’s more economically developed countries. But to act nontrivially upon that recognition is quite another matter. As this chapter has suggested, action at the individual level is a far simpler, more straightforward matter than action at a collective level, especially in proportion to the size, heterogeneity and jurisdictional complexity of the level of the collective in question. At this point in history, the prospect of an increasing cadre of practitioners of VS at whatever degrees of rigour seems far more feasible than the prospect of a whole nation, much less an international body, committing itself anytime soon to a goal of environmental sustainability worthy of the name. And even the former prospect – the prospect of anything more than scattered cases of individuals or families following the Beavans or the Kingsolvers wholeheartedly – is by no means assured.

That infinitely distressing gap between what educated, affluent humans ‘know’ to be right and the lamentably inadequate measures so far taken to act upon that recognition is precisely the space in which the work of environmental aesthetics and the critiques of environmental humanists stand to make their distinctive contribution, however. To them falls the responsibility of serving as consciences and guardians of environmental sustainability – as envisions and articulators of a good life worthy of the name – at this time in history when the ideology of scientific research (for legitimate reasons of its own) remains guardedly neutral, technology a two-edged sword, economic globalism addicted to growth as the crucial measure of health, and political processes and institutions gridlocked, the parties mutually at odds and the politicians (however decent in their private lives) forever susceptible to manipulation by interest groups. For in the arts and the humanities, although by no means always recognized by others or even by the practitioners themselves, lie the best hope for fathoming, articulating, dramatizing the qualitative factors that shape human motivations: affects, dreams, attitudes, values, convictions.

What result can be expected from those interventions? Will the environmental arts and humanities go down in history as nothing more than Cassandras to whom the denizens of the Anthropocene chose not to listen? Maybe so. But far better to make the attempt than to succumb to indifference or despair.

Notes

1 Some portions of the first part of this chapter were previously published in Lawrence Buell, ‘Does Thoreau Have a Future?’ Ecologies of Human Flourishing, eds Donald K. Swearer and Susan Lloyd McGarry (Cambridge MA: Center for The Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2011). I am grateful to the CSWR and to the President and Fellows of Harvard College for permission to reprint.
'Ecological footprint' denotes the relation between biocapacity and actual expenditure of natural capital or resources on human production and absorption of waste. A 'light' ecological footprint means that the latter is little if any greater than the former.

For the world's largest economy, a pithy summation of the latter is Timothy Noah, *The Great Divergence* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

For a more positive interpretation of consumption as a pathway toward ecological responsibility, see Kate Soper's chapter 'Towards a sustainable flourishing: democracy, hedonism and the politics of prosperity' on alternative hedonism later in this volume.

Even Layard's many critics do not seem to dispute the finding that for the wealthiest incremental gains in income mean smaller incremental gains in happiness than is the case for those lower down the economic ladder.

For further reflections on this subject, see Bengt Brolide's chapter 'Well-being and environmental responsibility' later in this volume, which after citing the Beavan family case pertinently observes, 'even if it were possible for each to adopt a sustainable lifestyle without loss of any well-being, it might not be possible for all (or sufficiently many) to do this'.


Note Berry's obvious reliance on etymology here: 'economy' as secular discipline derived from the concept of 'divine economy'.


Quotation from the book's subtitle. The main title, as Noah explains, is a phrase coined by Nobel laureate in economics, Paul Krugman. More recent studies question such aspects of this book's argument such as its contention that upward mobility for Americans has significantly diminished in recent years, but without questioning Noah's assertions of widening inequality between the economic top and bottom and the US's strikingly low rate of upward mobility compared to that of other developed economies, not to mention the myth of the US as a land of opportunity. See for example, Raj Cherry, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez and Nicholas Turner, 'Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility', *NBER Working Paper 18944* (January 2014).

'Environmental injustice' can be briefly defined as inequitable distribution of environmental benefits and hazards across population groups, with special concern for the plight of poor and/or ethno-racial minority groups. As a social movement, it has been striking for the leadership of groups represented marginally if at all in previous waves of environmental activism: the disprivileged, ethno-racial minorities and women. For the initially North American-centric phase of ecocriticism, see Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein (eds.) *The Environmental Justice Reader* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002). An influential analysis of the worldwide scope of environmental justice (EJ) social activism is Joan Martinez-Aller, *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cheltenham, UK: Elgar, 2002). The most influential example to date of EJ ecocriticism and postcolonial studies is Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). For summary reflections on the 'working of EJ

12 For more on this point, see Lawrence Buell, ‘Literature as Environmental(ist) Thought Experiment’, in Donald K. Swearer, *Ecology and the Environment: Perspectives from the Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2009), 21–36.


**Bibliography**


26  Lawrence Buell


