

## Home Economics: Towards a Research Agenda for the Bioregional Economy

‘Nature is not a place to visit, it is *home*’

Gary Snyder

In a world of climate change and declining oil supplies what is the plan for the provisioning of basic resources? Green economists suggest a need to replace the globalised economy, and its extended supply chains, with a more local economy (Hines, 2000). But what does this mean in more concrete terms? How large is a local economy, how self-reliant can it be, and what resources will still need to be imported? This paper uses the concept of the ‘bioregion’—developed and popularized within the disciplines of earth sciences, biosciences and planning—to reconceptualise the economy.

A bioregion has been defined as ‘a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries’ (Thayer, 2003: 3). A bioregional economy would be embedded within its bioregion and would acknowledge ecological limits. From an economic perspective, bioregions are natural social units determined by ecology rather than economics, and that can be largely self-sufficient in terms of basic resources such as water, food, products and services. A bioregional approach to the economy would mean living a rooted life, being aware of where your resources come from and where your wastes go. Unlike political boundaries, bioregional boundaries are flexible, but should be guided by the principle of subsidiarity in the case of any individual resource or service. Within the bioregional approach beginning with the local is a principle that trumps principles such as price or choice. Within our bioregional economy we are responsible for all our waste and we have a neutral impact on the natural cycles that maintain the earth in balance, primarily the carbon cycle.

It is difficult for us to imagine what it would mean to live ‘a rooted life’ because, since the introduction of the feudal system in 1066 and especially since the enclosure of common land in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the UK (Neeson, 1989) there has been an ongoing process of dislocation of people from the land (see McIntosh, 2001). Thus while a significant part of the research agenda for bioregional economics will be concerned with mapping our existing bioregions and assessing which resources each might most useful provide in surplus to others, an equally important strand of research should be concerned with considering the social and cultural implications of an economy which is re-embedded in the environment in the way that bioregionalism proposes.

The paper begins with an account of the conceptualization of the bioregion within the disciplines of earth sciences and biosciences including the work of Kirkpatrick Sale, Bob Thayer and Mike Carr. It relates this concept to the work of political economists including Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, Leopold Kohr, and E. F. Schumacher, and the planners Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford. It then seeks to apply the concept as developed in these other disciplines to the central question of economics: the allocation and distribution of resources with reference to the four concepts which I have identified elsewhere as being key to the development of the bioregional economy: locality, accountability, community, and conviviality (Cato, 2007).

This is paper is a scoping exercise which begins to explore how the concept of a ‘bioregion’ might be useful within theoretical economics. It begins the process of sketching out our understanding of the UK as a system of bioregional economies and applying this understanding to the way we access our resources and dispose of our wastes. Finally, the beginnings of a research agenda for bioregional economics are sketched.

*Bioregionalism: Provenance and Relevance of the Concept*

The concept of bioregionalism grew out of work undertaken by environmentalists in California and the US West Coast in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The focus was the need to respond to the environmental crisis by developing a different, more embedded relationship with their landscape. This included deepening their knowledge of local climate, ecology, species and culture and drew heavily on the native American tradition. Globalisation is seen as a system that divorces people from their locality; bioregionalism helps them to relearn their place in space. It is, as Gary Snyder has it (1990: 44), ‘the entry of place into the dialectic of history’.

Barry’s description of bioregionalism as a social theory focuses on its critique that citizens in complex modern societies

‘have ‘forgotten’ that the economy and all its works is a subset and dependent upon the wider ecosystem. . . . Modern citizens have not only lost contact with the land, and their sense of embeddedness in the land, but at the same time they have lost those elemental social forms of more or less intimate and relatively transparent social relations. Thus a basic aim of bioregionalism is to get people back in touch with the land, and constitutive of that process is the recreation of community in a strong sense. (Barry, 1990: 9).

One of the key questions of this research paper is to what extent this experience can be generalised beyond its Californian home, and to derive implications for an economy that finds a place within the environment, rather than merely exploiting the planet’s resources.

The US West coast has a quite distinct economic and cultural history. It still retains large areas of wilderness land and in large part is sparsely populated. There are major differences in scale when compared with European environments. The nature of relationship with the land is also different, both in terms of the exploitation of the frontier and the contrasting ‘land ethic’ (Leopold, 1949) of the native peoples. Finally, and significantly, the persistence of wilderness has meant the continued existence of megafauna, which, while under threat, are a part of the ecosystem in a way they are not in the UK or much of industrialised Europe.

In spite of the profound implications for resource allocation of the environmental crisis, economic responses have remained limited in vision and scope (Stern, 2007), with few academic economists asking fundamental questions about what sort of lives will be possible in an era of energy limits as a result of pro-climate policies and peak oil (North, 2009). In environmental circles these questions have been common currency for several decades: ‘The critical argument now within environmental circles is between those who operate from a human-centered resource management mentality and those whose values reflect and awareness of the integrity of the whole of nature.’ (Snyder, 1990: 194). Part of the purpose of the research agenda proposed here is to force this discussion into the arena of academic economics.

Outside the academy questions are being asked about the level of consumption that will be possible within the new paradigm and about the need to develop a new ethic of consumption. In the view of Kirkpatrick Sale, sufficiency is unproblematic:

Certainly there is not a single bioregion in North America or elsewhere . . . there are sufficient resources to provide a stable and satisfying life, though indeed their abundance and splendour might vary greatly. Certainly there is not a single bioregion in this country, even at the georegional level, that would not, if looked to all its natural endowments, be able to provide its residents with sufficient food, energy, shelter, and clothing, their own

health care and education and arts, their own manufactures and crafts. (Sale, 2000: 75).

However, such optimism is largely an article of faith, with little energy dedicated to studies. An honourable exception is the work carried out by Simon Fairle (2007), which attempts to compare the capacity of the UK to feed its population domestically, based on a range of agricultural systems. His findings are optimistic, but further detailed research along the same lines, together with a thorough survey of available agricultural land, is essential and urgent. Similarly, concerns about food security are beginning to surface in policy circles, and as food becomes in shorter global supply we begin to see the fallacy of the idea of a post-agricultural economy and the vulnerability of being an importer in the global supermarket. As Barry argued, bioregionalists have always maintained that ‘whereas it may be possible to have a “post-industrial society” we cannot have a “post-agricultural society”’. Yet this is precisely the ‘misperception’ of the majority of citizens in the western world.’ (Barry, 1990: 9).

#### *From Localisation to the Bioregional Economy*

Hines (2000) opened the argument for a relocalisation of economic systems with his ‘manifesto’ for localization. However, beyond this useful introduction to the problem and sketch of some possible policies there has been little work in terms of detailing precisely how local economies will produce, derive or allocate their produce. In an earlier paper (Cato, 2007) I listed the key characteristics of the bioregional economy—locality, accountability, community, and conviviality—and I would like to explore these in more detail here.

#### **Locality**

Bioregionalists have lent rhetorical support to a ‘basic bioregional vision is of a patchwork of self-sufficient, small-scale, ecologically harmonious communities, organised according to their own normative standards’ (Barry, 1990: 13) which have much in common with Kropotkin’s ‘small industries and industrial villages’ (Kropotkin, 1899/1985). Self-sufficiency also requires us to be more rounded and more skilful citizens, in contrast to the dependence on corporations that has been encouraged by the globalised economy. In contrast a bioregional economy ‘fosters of necessity a more cohesive, more self-regarding, more self-concerned populace, with a developed sense of community and comradeship as well as the pride and resiliency that come with the knowledge of one’s competence, control, stability and independence.’ (Sale, 2000: 78).

The first understanding of conceptions of the bioregional economy, and one which led to trenchant critique, was that it resulted in an autarkic form of independence, that might also be considered xenophobic and self-centred. According to Barry, writing in 1990, ‘the autarky imperative coupled with strict ecosystem dependence, implies that those living in resource-poor ecosystems are condemned to their fate as there is no provision for the redistribution of resources between bioregions’. However, this has been clarified by later writers, who make clear that self-sufficiency is in no way equivalent to a parochial and self-focused autarky. Rather the green vision for relationship between nations and regions is one of cultural openness and maximisation of exchange that can be achieved in a world of limited energy, within a framework of self-sufficiency in basic resources and the limiting of trade to those goods which are not indigenous due to reasons of climate or local speciality. The vision can be summarised in the phrases ‘trade subsidiarity’ combined with ‘cultural diversity’.

## Accountability

The failure of capitalism has led to much criticism of the failure of responsibility and accountability in its late phase. Whether this is criticism of bank regulation or the lack of respect shown by global corporations to workers in poorer countries and the global environment, the failure of responsibility on the part of businesses and the need for corporate social responsibility has been much discussed. A bioregional economy would tackle this problem at source: each bioregion would be the area of the global economy for which its inhabitants were responsible—if every local community protects its own backyard, and especially if employees have ownership and control of the own workplaces through the expansion of worker co-operatives, then we can expect higher levels of social and environmental responsibility (Cato *et al.*, 2007).

## Community

As is evident from the quotation from Barry cited earlier, community is a key aspect of the bioregional vision, and one which has significant implications for economic organization. The failure of community and the atomization of people as consumers rather than citizens has typified late 20<sup>th</sup> century life, as the market has replaced human relationships and important aspects of human life have been commodified (Sustainable Development Commission, 2009). The bioregional economy will offer stronger human relationships, especially those based on a revival of skilled craft work (Sennett, 2008), together with the reclaiming of public space for citizenship and relationship. A typical example of the dominance of the market is the monopolization of public space by the supermarket and the shopping-mall. The French ‘*decroissance*’ or ‘*de-growth*’ movement argues for ‘putting the economy back in its place’ and reclaiming the public space for the citizen rather than the consumer. They seek to revive the traditions of community inherent in the Greek *agora* or Roman forum, where sociality and the transmission of news was as important as the exchange of goods: ‘The *agora* is first and foremost a place of public life and civil society’. (Fournier, 2007).

Within the bioregional community each person will, as has already been argued, need to have the skills to provide the products that are exchanged in the local market. This will require not only a reskilling but also the growth of the multi-skilled citizen, who has been undermined and squeezed out of the labour-market during the past two hundred years of industrialization, which has been supported by fossil fuels that are rapidly being exhausted. Kropotkin argued for ‘harmonised labour’ which he view as just such diversity of occupation which—and its social benefits—more than 100 years ago:

‘the greatest sum of well-being can be obtained when a variety of agricultural, industrial and intellectual pursuits are combined in each community; and that man shows his best when he is in a position to apply his usually varied capacities to several pursuits in the farm, the workshop, the factory, the study or the studio, instead of being riveted for life to one of these pursuits only.’ (Kropotkin, 1899/1985: 18).

The guild socialists and the inspiration William Morris similarly argued the social and psychological benefits of craft work, and of the relationship between master and apprentice (Cole 1953-60).

Although green economists are frequently criticised as merchants of the hair-shirt, in reality the bioregional vision is one of increased well-being with less energy and

activity. There is evidence that those who seek their satisfaction non-materially are happier, benefiting from what Soper and Thomas (2006) call ‘alternative hedonism’.

### Conviviality

A stronger community with deeper relationships and closer human ties is what the bioregional economy has to offer, to some extent to compensate for the intensity of consumption that climate change and diminishing supplies of fossil fuels make impossible. Conviviality is an expression of how this might affect ourselves as ethical and spiritual beings, and how it affects our identity. The word was first used in the sense by Illich, who defined it as follows:

I choose the term ‘conviviality’ to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value. I believe that, in any society, as conviviality is reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members. (Illich, 1974).

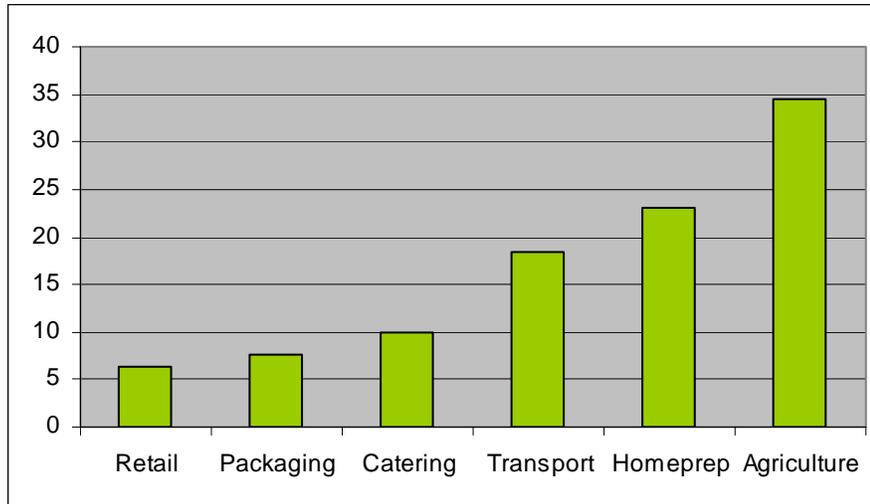
As argued by North (2009), this conviviality, together with ‘resilience and vibrancy’ can provide a basis for livelihoods to replace a dependence on ‘material goods and “growth” for its own sake.’

Perhaps we can imagine this rather more abstract benefit best in terms of the consumption of food. We are already beginning to see a shift from the supermarket to the farmers’ markets and from global to local production. The concept of provenance is key to the less tangible benefits of this new form of consumption and describes the way that eating from our local soil and valuing local products enhances their non-material value (Morgan *et al.*, 2006). An example from my home county of Gloucestershire is the expansion of local orchards and the several hundred varieties of local apple that are now grown and celebrated there. My own town boasts the Lodgemore Non-Pareil and the county also has its own Old Spot pig variety and a particularly beautiful species of cattle. No doubt we can all think of similar examples of the value people derive from their local specialities, especially in France with its regional *produits du terroir*. I will never forget a meal I enjoyed during the Agen prune festival which managed to skilfully include dried plums in every course—including a delicious prune liqueur.

Making and sharing food is another custom that has declined but that will be revived as fuel prices rise. As the graph shows, almost a quarter of the petroleum associated with food consumption relates to preparation in the home, and this clearly relates to the expansion of single-person households. Communal eating makes energy sense, as well as increasing conviviality:

What has gone missing from it is the sense of the meal as a prepared, shared, convivial event having its own intrinsic value in structuring time, fostering human exchange, and providing food for thought as well as bodily renewal. (Soper and Thomas, 2006).

This conviviality and the stronger sense of identification with the local environment and its products is an important stage in re-embedding ourselves into the eco-system, as well as offering us a local identity to substitute for our global consumer identity. This is the beginning of a new consumption ethic.



Source: Lucas, Jones, and Hines (2006), *Fuelling a Food Crisis*

#### *Sharing our Resources in a Bioregional Economy*

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the dominant mechanism for the allocation of goods in the global economy, the market, is heavily reliant on a form of economic life that is environmentally obsolete. So, a fundamental question for proponents of a bioregional approach to the economy is: what will replace the global market as the major distribution mechanism? The limited length of this paper precludes the development of a complete answer, but researchers may begin to search our past for clues to our shared future. The markets as described by Adam Smith were, of course, far different from those we shop in today, and in fact represented only the marginal consumption of people who provided for many of their own needs. Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was written during the phase of dismantling of a system of self-provisioning based on common land.

Snyder describes the common as 'a territory which is not suitable for crops' and lies 'between the extremes of deep wilderness and the private plots of the farmstead' (1990: 32). Commons were not, as suggested by critics, wild spaces where the fittest fought for the right to over-graze, but rather were large proportions of land (Neeson, 1989, estimates up to 30 per cent of British rural land) whose use was controlled by a complex system of social and economic norms. Perhaps more importantly from the perspective of this paper, they represented a form of subsistence where meeting your needs from the local environment was explicit:

The commons is a curious and elegant social institution within which human beings once lived free political lives while weaving through natural systems. The commons is a level of organization of human society that includes the nonhuman. The level above the local commons is the bioregion. Understanding the commons and its role within the larger regional culture is one more step toward integrating ecology with economy. (Snyder, 1990: 40).

To reiterate the point made above, commons represented a system of economic sharing, where being resident was more important than ownership. As Snyder indicates, they were tightly controlled to prevent their over-use, a point that ties in with the theoretical point made earlier about the link between local inhabitation and responsibility:

the commoner could only turn out to common range as many head of cattle as he could feed over the winter in his own corrals. This meant that no one was allowed to increase his herd from outside with a cattle drive just for summer grazing. (This was known in Norman legal language as the rule of *levancy and couchancy*: you could only run the stock that you actually had 'standing and sleeping' within winter quarters.) (Snyder, 1990: 33).

Neeson's close, historical study of some British commons indicates just how much they were able to provide. Obviously there was grazing and the possibility to gather firewood and other materials that were used for fires—furze (gorse) and bracken (fern). Commoners also took hazel loppings to make hurdles for penning sheep, and fern was used for animal bedding and, once burnt, its ash was used to make soap. In addition:

Reed was plentiful and valued most as thatch for roofs and also to cover the stacks, ricks and clamps for all kinds of crops and vegetables. Rushes—bulrushes—were equally plentiful, waterproof, and woven into baskets, mats, hats, chair seats and toys. . . they were also good for bedding, as a netting in the plastering of walls, and wrapping for soft milk cheeses. They made cheap, bright rushlights too (Neeson, 1989: 166).

The list of foraging crops, especially nuts, berries and fungi is equally long, as were the possibilities for foraging salad crops and herbs. It is clear from these accounts that the commoning lifestyle offered two other characteristics crucial to a bioregional approach to provisioning: seasonality and shared experience. It also brings to vivid life contemporary calls for 'edible landscapes'.

The dismantling of the commons was disastrous for commoners but crucial for the growth of the industrial market system, which they were required to staff. Neeson's account makes clear the link between the ending of subsistence and the population explosion which Malthus and other political economists later bemoaned. She also chronicles how the move from commoner to labourer undermined the resilience and self-reliance of British citizens.

The purpose of this discussion is not to hark back to some lost and probably romanticised utopia, but rather to remember that, before the market, there were other ways of sharing resources within and between communities. Further research into the nature of commons economies, both historical and contemporary, will be a feature of the bioregional research agenda that this paper seeks to inspire.

#### *A Possible Research Agenda*

Although this paper originates from the discipline of economics, developing a bioregional economy is clearly an interdisciplinary project. While, as I have stressed throughout, the actual boundaries of a country's bioregions is not the most fundamental question to be addressed, it is important, and the contribution of geographers and especially economic geographers is clearly crucial. Mapping is one aspect of developing and expanding the concept of a bioregional economy. Where the distinct bioregions of any country lies will depend on a host of local characteristics:

A *bioregion* is literally and etymologically a 'life-place'—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related identifiable landforms and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region.

While this work is important, and needs to be supplemented with a thorough survey of our agricultural land and its production potential, at this stage of our evolution bioregions are just as importantly about our identification. Here is a research agenda for social anthropologists, to map and analyse the cultural understandings about our place in space and following on from that, questions about how this affects our relationship with the natural world and our attitude towards local consumption.

As already stated, this is an interdisciplinary research agenda and this paper cannot hope to do more than begin to sketch the turf. However, I would suggest that questions that may need to be answered include:

- How might bioregionalism help us think about how to construct a more diverse economy of local economies more connected to the natural world?
- How large is an economic bioregion and should it have fixed boundaries?
- How would economic bioregions be defined—in terms of watersheds or other natural features?
- How does the way people think about their natural world affect their economies?
- What institutions might be appropriate in a bioregional economy and to what extent can we follow the model of the commons in managing shared resources?
- How has the advent of climate change altered perceptions of the security of access to basic resources?
- What is 'the local' in localization?

The initial reaction to a suggestion that we need to become regionally self-sufficient in terms of provision for our basic needs can be shock: 'I can understand that there may be residual fears that a bioregional economy based on stability and conservation would mean terrible deprivation, a loss of all our material gains, a reversion to some kind of hand-to-mouth existence where we'd all be living in caves and plucking berries.' (2000: 71). On the one hand, this shock must be confronted, since the scientific data emerging from Copenhagen and other international conferences suggests that the need for massive reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions means that we have little choice about accepting significant and urgent changes in our consumption behaviour. On the other hand, the bioregional economy offers much that may be a substitute for an economy which, while it has offered much materially to those of us in the affluent economies of the West, has bought this at a large cost to the poor nations and the planet itself, and has also increasingly neglected our deeper, spiritual needs.

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