

The New

Anarchy

by
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A talk given by G. Purchase in the Migrant Resource Centre, West End, Brisbane at a conference. Mayday 1994

At certain times in history the mass of people have felt the need for communal, political and economic self government. But the social urge toward an anarchist society has been a transitory and peripheral phenomenon – like a rainbow in a spring shower at dawn, which will inevitably fade with the coming of a new day. In order to make social anarchy a practical and realisable alternative to capital and state we must present the public with a very clear concept of the basic organisational principles of the new society we wish to create. There is no point in blabbing endlessly about liberty and freedom unless we can agree about the bare bones upon which a free society can be founded. The Bio-region, the Commune, and the Trade Co-operative or Syndicate are, we suggest, vital organs and limbs of the new social order that we could build within the shell of the old. Let us briefly examine these in turn.

Part I — Bio-region

Most anarchists are committed to the concept of decentralisation. It is often however used simply as a slogan with little attempt to figure out what territorial, economic and political decentralisation might look like in practice. The bio-region or life-territory is a concrete, practicable and verifiable unit upon which to base our social anarchy. Rather than absurdly dividing the land according to the traditions of imperial conquest and centralised administration, we should begin to redefine our sense of space and place in terms of natural geographical features. The most important feature is the distribution of rivers and drainage patterns around which the rest of nature develops. The large rivers of the continent, such as the Murray-Darling basin, constitute the larger Ecological Regions.

The divisions between various tributaries when compounded by differences in physiography, climate, and the distribution of plants, animals and trees constitute the bio-region. Fig. 1, which is based upon a governmental geographical survey, shows the distribution of the major eco-regions of Australia based upon drainage and certain social realities concerning the distribution of human settlement. It is estimated that these eco-regions would divide into some 235 bio-regions.

All of this might seem a somewhat remote possibility. The generally poor state of Australia's rivers have prompted many governmental officials to begin talking in terms of Total Watershed Management. Satellite imagery and computer mapping systems make it easier and easier to create detailed and informative bio-regional maps. Although bio-regional limits cannot be rigidly defined like a postal district or a shire boundary, they can certainly provide an objective and environmentally intelligent basis upon which to build a decentralised society. If every person, in every region of the Earth, comes to love and respect the ecological dynamics of their region, whilst finding sustainable life-ways that enhance and preserve it, then the chances of global environmental health will be greatly increased. By getting people to identify with the natural features of their region, rather than cultural or nationalist images, people may feel far less inclined to invade another's region, and war may in future be avoided. In practice Bio-regionalism may imply giving large portions of the land back to native vegetation and learning to use

agricultural land more productively. This is not an absurd proposition. Some governments, such as the Costa Rican one, are already pursuing a policy of maintaining a quarter of the country as wilderness. This policy includes the restoration of dry tropical rain forests, only 2% of which remains standing world-wide.

The Community or Green Commune

For most people in Australia the Community or Green Commune would be a suburb in a large city. Although we may dream of returning to small towns and settlements the reality is that by far the vast majority of Australians live in a few very large cities. At present these cities inhale enormous quantities of resources and spew out an equal amount of garbage, waste and poison. The city must become able to live off its own wastes and feed and supply itself without causing damage to the surrounding bio-region or importing the wealth of others. The principles of urban permaculture are well known. In fact we have the knowledge to make the city self-sufficient now. The multi-dimensionality of cities can produce new surfaces upon which to produce food and other materials. Reed-beds that can aerate and purify sewerage can be designed to operate vertically

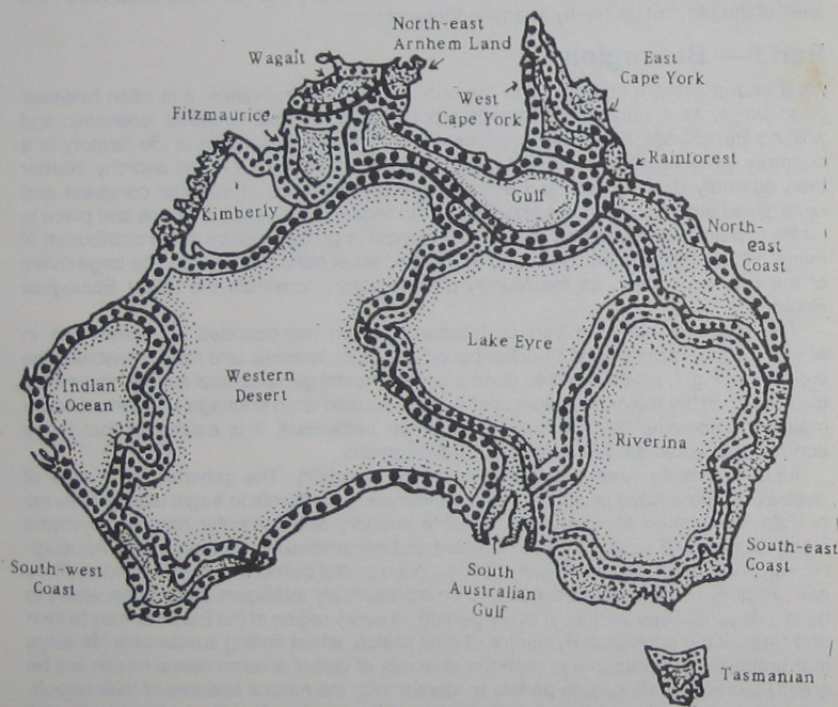


Fig 1. Eco-Regional Australia

down walls. One beehive can produce 50kg of honey a year. If the hive is placed above head-height, such as on a flat roof or balcony, the bee's flight-path does not interfere with human traffic. Rabbits, guinea pigs & chickens can be fed on household vegetable waste and by planting the back yard with trees, seed-plants and greens attractive to them, they can provide food indefinitely and for free! A small kitchen or balcony garden can produce a very significant amount of fresh herbs and vegetables with little labour, by using green manure plants and mulches. If these principles were extended the city could rapidly transform the quality of urban life. Roads could be removed to create community gardens and walkways with inter suburban travel being undertaken by aerial bicycle freeways. The city would not only be a better place to live but it would become steadily more self-sufficient and less of a burden upon the surrounding bio-region. Moreover the people of each suburb rather than having to travel to work in the city centre each day to earn money to pay for food could spend time growing their own. It is possible to design suburbs whose houses maximise solar energy inputs, and whose gardens have been planted with fruit and nut trees within a landscape that is designed to trap rain water in swales, ditches and walls and direct it to their roots. Residents in experimental suburbs have found that for a little extra investment urban life can become both cheaper and more pleasant.

Flexible photo-voltaic sheets can now be moulded to neatly hug roofs of any shape. Technology has been developed that can generate electricity through the tinted windows on tower blocks. Most North European cities have significant wind power programs. After a successful wind power pilot experiment in Esperance (Western Australia), the first 10 mega watt installation in Australia will shortly be constructed in Victoria. The electricity from these installations is not being used to power self-sufficient local communities but is being fed into the national grid. Capital and state intend to profit from our inability to come together as a community and construct such installations for ourselves. There is no doubt that the self-sufficient suburb could be created tomorrow if the residents of the community chose to do so. Our problem is not one of eco-technics but of a total absence of community in many suburbs. People generally live in their little brick boxes, on their little parcels of land, showing little interest in creating the kind of sub-urban community life-style of which we speak. How do we get urban people to pool the land and resources of their suburb for the good of all the residents? How do we get the community to set aside a vacant block here and there for a cherry orchard, a methane sewerage digester or a vegetable garden? Many people evidently would not enjoy living like monks in a suburban monastery, where all eat around the same dinner table at tea time and have specific functions within a tight-knit community but this kind of suffocating and closed form of lifestyle is not necessary or desirable. The benefits of a strong local economy can be obtained without all of us having to live in the dormitory and eat out of the same bowl. A local gardener can simply be employed by the community to supply them with fresh produce on community owned/controlled land.

It has been suggested that through using local exchange and trading networks (or L.E.T.S.), where goods, products and services are exchanged locally by computer points, it may be possible to create a suburban community economy whilst continuing to live in a more individualistic home-environment, with local goods and services being exchanged by non-governmental means in a non-capitalist community market-place. A worker from the gardeners' syndicate could simply exchange L.E.T.S. points for treatment of a bad back by a local doctor. The creation of a more stable and self-sufficient urban landscape will certainly however have to do away with large private

gardens, lawns and ostentatious houses. Smaller dwellings with only a little private out-door space will have to be exchanged for a much greater area of communal or civic space

The Green Syndicate

All of us take a global postal or telecommunications service for granted. In order to have this it may be necessary to have a technician in each suburb or town in the world. This requires global organisation and co-operation that cannot be organised by the individual bio-region but by the postal workers in each bio-region of the world forming themselves into a global federation. Likewise total self sufficiency is wasteful. If every town, village or hamlet had to produce its own razor blades, life would become extra-ordinarily difficult. (The collection and recycling of the blunted blades by members of wholesale and manufacturing syndicates is a way of overcoming this problem.) Vital goods and services, such as the provision of razor blades, are best produced at a centralised plant. The workers of the Razor Blade factory obtaining their daily needs by means of L.E.T.S. points (based on 1 labour hour = 1 point) accredited to their accounts at local stores and warehouses by distributors of their product in other regions. So long as there is some parity in the value of exchanged goods and services between the neighbouring bio-regions of the larger ecological region, there would be few problems in administering such a system. In order to avoid constant difficulties, such a system might best be operated by means of syndicalist banks using local currency and charging their clients in L.E.T.S. points for the labour exacted in dealing with their transactions. In general we may conclude that the workers of the syndicates, after providing an honest living for themselves, should operate upon a non-profit basis for the good of all of the community.

Part II — Anarchism, Labour & Environment

Labour is something that makes more skilled work possible. It provides the human energy which sustains our children and transforms raw nature into the items of manufacture we consume. Labour comes in many forms. Some of the most important are: (A) Domestic, (B) Individual, (C) Communal, (D) Craft or Guild, (E) Industrial Union or Syndicate. Let us explore some of these different forms of Labour in relation to social-anarchism and environmental issues. When we refer to Labour we evidently don't just mean industrial, factory or office work. There is much labour that is of a household, domestic or communal nature which is vital to sustain our society. Washing linen or doing voluntary work for a local tree-planting brigade are examples of domestic and communal labour. In the act of creating the green community, many new forms of local employment will be created – garden maintenance, communal pond-dredging, tree-pruning and a host of secondary industries or co-operatives developing out of the need to re-use or re-cycle all of the community's waste. The adoption of communal exchange networks will create a communal economy that is of equal importance to work performed in the factories, railways or workshops. Much domestic work is simply wasteful and environmentally destructive. Millions of washing machines, fridges, dish-washers and ovens, churn or burn away the precious resources of our Earth everyday. Our houses are crammed full with every machine of convenience. Backyard children's play areas, car-ports and swimming pools are wasteful in every respect. A children's play area and a swimming pool can be provided on each street for the benefit of all the residents. This would liberate acres of suburban land for food production. Rather than

building swimming pools we should be constructing backyard ponds for fish and fowl production, or to encourage frogs to eat mosquitoes and snails. Nappy or linen cleaning services, healthy nutritious food served from public canteens, public baths, child-care etc., if organised properly could virtually eliminate individually performed housework. Workers from the Laundry co-operative or syndicate would simply collect the dirty washing each day from each house, cleaning it in a communal laundry, and returning it the next morning or the following week. We should not pretend that all individualistically performed house work would disappear. We would still want to wash delicate or precious garments, by hand, at home. Commercial nappy-cleaning services for the environmentally conscious are proving successful in the U.S.A. and are an obvious way to solve the problem of disposables.

But who should maintain the communal swimming or car pool? The residents themselves or a local member of the life-savers' or mechanics' syndicate. If a child is injured whilst playing at a communal playground – because the residents had failed to attend to its maintenance – the natural response of the parents would be to call for some Union of People, to be established to ensure the proper maintenance of the equipment. With regard to child-care, sanitation, track and road maintenance, etc., proper procedures and industrial discipline have to be strictly adhered to for the benefit and safety of all. Industrial Syndicalism is a method of working where the worker is answerable to his or her colleagues in the same industry. Standards of behaviour and production will have to be established by all the members for the benefit of all.

Through a combining communalism and syndicalism we can establish an egalitarian union structure where the rights of laundry, childcare & catering workers can be properly represented. Of course much of this kind of labour can be undertaken by informal co-operatives but there will always be issues within domestic & communal labour that will need to be discussed inter-regionally or globally. Although in the past, domestic labour was performed by all the women of the tribe, domestic labour has been poorly rewarded in more recent times because it has been performed on an individualistic basis. Domestic labour will not be liberated by pushing individual household labour into a new communal ghetto. The conditions under which communally organised domestic labour is performed should be protected by an established body of domestic workers.

Eco comes from the Greek word for home. Just as we now regard our house as our home, we must come to understand that our home-place is also our bio-region and the Earth. The nurturing of our bio-region through bush-regeneration projects or fish hatcheries is, in this expanded sense of home, an example of domestic labour as well. Through combining the organisational potential of the commune, syndicate and bio-region, it might be possible to eliminate the drudgery and environmental destructiveness of individual household work whilst allowing the concept of domestic or household labour to include the beautification and restoration of the environment of our region. The destruction of local art and craft guilds by capitalism has left a clear gap in our economy. In order to re-enter the dynamics of the bio-region, it will be necessary to create local craft-based guilds, co-operatives or unions to process local resources. Wild reeds of the region, for example, if harvested in a sustainable way, can provide animal feed, paper, basket work and roof thatch. Small scale trade co-operatives are a vital link in achieving bio-regional self-sufficiency and sustainability through utilising globally scarce but regionally plentiful resources to fulfil a multiplicity of different needs locally.

As we discussed earlier it is simply absurd for every region to produce razor blades. When you sit in your lounge room most of the items that will surround you will have been

produced by industrial manufacture. We might now yearn for a communal craft-based economy but we are completely dependent upon a system of production owned and run for the benefit of the ruling classes. Capitalism is becoming more vicious. Welfare, wages and conditions are everywhere declining. The state-capitalist money machine is destroying the Earth and its inhabitants. We cannot return to a communal-based economy overnight even if the workers desired it (which they don't). We cannot afford to simply smash the industrial system upon which we are dependent. Rather we should wrest the material wealth of society away from organised capitalism and re-orientate this vast resource so as to provide everyone, by environmentally beneficial methods, with the basic services and manufactured products they require. It is certain that we shall have to move towards a more communal, more local, and less industrial methods of production, in areas such as food production and forestry, where extensive industrial methods have proved devastating for the health of entire continents. In our attempt to provide food through means of community gardens and urban food-forests, we shall be de-industrialising the food and farming industries. In other areas, such as in the area of domestic labour, it may be necessary to bring a degree of professionalism and accountability to communally performed services. In our attempt to bypass the wastefulness of housework we shall be unionising and industrialising many areas of domestic labour. The development of non-polluting urban and inter-regional transport demands a commitment to public transport – demand that is unlikely to be met through the present fad for privatisation, job losses and closures, and which can most usefully be provided by workers co-operatives organised into transport syndicates. Green Syndicalism thus complements the Green Community. In some bio-regions people may prefer to perform certain functions communally and informally, whilst in another the same task might be performed by union labour. We are not trying to provide a rigid blueprint or unalterable plan but simply exploring a very few of the possible relationships between different aspects of labour in an environmentally sustainable and culturally viable social anarchy.

Part III — Green Industry & Bio-Diversity

It is now an established fact that the composition of the atmosphere was kept stable for many millions of year prior to the development of mammals by micro-organisms. It has been suggested that algae, bacteria and other micro-organisms could maintain conditions suitable for human life in the total absence of most of the other forms of life which now inhabit the Earth. Rainforests are disappearing rapidly, national parks and wildlife reserves are far from adequate and regrowth eco-systems are never the same and rarely as complex as the old-growth. Rapid invasive weed infestation have irreparably damaged wilderness reserves. Likewise there are suggestions that we should attempt to reafforest the Earth with fast-growing trees or cultivate certain types of algae, as carbon storage reservoirs or atmosphere regulators. Perhaps regional bio-diversity is a thing of the past? Might not the world come to be dominated by a few varieties of fast-growing trees adapted to broad climatic difference and a small number of globally dominant weeds species. With the microbes, worms and plantation trees keeping the world going for us, surely it would be simply a matter of greening the capitalist industrial machine? To some extent this has been experimented with in Brazil where a large percentage of the country's automobile fuel is alcohol, derived from sugar cane. The fibre which is left over, once the juice has been extracted, can be burnt to generate

electricity. This will soon generate nearly 25% of Brazil's energy needs, the carbon dioxide given off during combustion being taken up by the leaves of the new crop of cane in the fields. (In this respect it is therefore a stable procedure.) The Volvo Company have recently unveiled a car that can be driven on vegetable oil that you can purchase at any supermarket. Although I would not choose to live in the world like this, we can clearly envision a world where much of the world's bio-diversity has been eliminated, and humanity's basic needs are provided by environmentally clean industries on much the same basis as they are today. If this is indeed the world we create, our children will have to decide whether these new green industries should be owned and operated by the workers, the community, the state, or an elite class. There would be a choice between Green Syndicalism, Green Municipalism, Green Capitalism or Green Communism.

As anarchists we would naturally choose a mixture of Green Syndicalism & Municipalism. But why has the issue of bio-diversity become such a dominant issue in recent years? One answer is that the capitalists realise that they can patent juicy bits of genetic material and medicinal extracts from rain forests. On the other hand the general public and the scientists realise that there must be a sufficiently large and diverse number of organic life ways in order that life on Earth can survive under new and varying conditions. Our survival is dependent upon genetic diversity and not bio-spheric minimalism. As industry gradually becomes more biologically orientated and begins more and more to process organic materials instead of synthetic ones, plants with unusual or important properties will become more and more valuable. The fact that the government has felt compelled to protect the seeds of the rare fox-tail palm in Cape Melville from poachers is an example of how plant materials can generate money, speculation and corruption.

Bio-diversity is however in large part a product of regional isolation and variation. Diversity exists because the planet is geographically divided by mountains, rivers and oceans, into a large number of bio-regions and micro-climates. The only sure way to protect bio-diversity in the long term is to adopt a bio-regionalist strategy where the inhabitants themselves come to care and preserve the biota of their region on a loving and ongoing basis. Moreover the industrial approach to agriculture is not feasible. The silt from the cane fields of Queensland will in time kill the Barrier Reef. The recurring and prolonged drought in the North is due to the near total absence of lowland rainforest. If we are not to destroy the soils upon which all life depends, green industries must be combined with land-sensitive farming techniques which are more suited to a bio-regional economy than a national one. The need to preserve regional bio-diversity and make the best use of the soil upon which we grow our food will necessitate a bio-regionalist structure.

All of the technical and permacultural information that we need to live in a sustainable way with the Earth is already available to us. What is lacking is a coherent bio-social structure in which humanity can harness the vast range of environmentally safe technologies and life-ways, already known to us, for the good of all. We assert that a new social-anarchy based upon bio-regionalism, syndicalism and communalism provides such a structure. It is our duty to carry our message proudly and resolutely to our friends and colleagues in our community, workplace and region.

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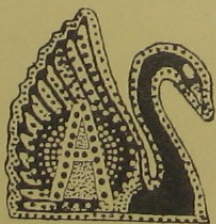
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