

MAIN CURRENTS  
IN WESTERN  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
THOUGHT

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love tells a truth after all ... it is surely a being that is greater than anything any of us will ever conceive of in any detail worthy of its detail. Is something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred (1995: 520).

The foundations of modern science may currently be under more rigorous challenge — from within science — than at any time in the past 250 years. But the point I would make here is that, despite misgivings within the environment movement about the various paradigmatic rivals, a case can be made that they all potentially provide environmentalist aspirations with a degree of authority that has been hard to win from mechanistic science. How to predict the future of the green dialogue with science? The situation is fluid, the picture confused, and much will depend upon the resolution of debates within science itself. But a less conflictual relationship between green aspirations and the authority of science is at least conceivable.

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## RECLAIMING PLACE: SEEKING AN AUTHENTIC GROUND FOR BEING

## A LITERATURE OF PLACE

Poets, novelists and essayists have long made the idiosyncratic specialness of place a prominent literary theme, but the elevation of place-writing to 'genre' status is predominantly the achievement of a robust North American tradition of nature writing. Such writing — the writing of the *experiencers* of place — adopts an approach to the comprehension and interpretation of place that could serve as paradigmatic of the phenomenological method. In his modern masterpiece, *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez writes:

the land retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we can know. Our obligation toward it then becomes simple: to approach with an uncalculating mind, with an attitude of regard. To try to sense the range and variety of its expression — its weather and colours and animals. To intend from the beginning to preserve some of the mystery within it as a kind of wisdom to be experienced, not questioned (1987: 228).

These literary constructions of place are, respecting their phenomenology, largely unselfconscious and a-theoretical; though Lopez does note that his writing 'focuses mostly on what logical positivists sweep aside' (1997: 24). Lopez best suits our purpose here, because he, almost uniquely, stands back and reflects upon what he is doing (Romand Coles writes of Lopez having 'a world that is *both inside and outside* of the conversation; 1993: 242). He does this in *Arctic Dreams*, and he does it, too, in his many short essays. There is even a certain tension between the Lopez who is immersed unselfconsciously in place

and the Lopez who draws back to examine his project with a degree of detachment. In his essay 'The Stone Horse', he notes how a critical interrogation of an ancient horse of stones on the desert floor impeded his appreciation of it, the 'process of abstraction', a process unintentionally adopted, drawing him 'gradually away from the horse' (1986: 227).

This is a recurring theme in Lopez's writing. Seek to know place with all the senses, and beware too great an emphasis on the partial knowledge provided by interrogative processes. 'Put aside the bird book, the analytic frame of mind, any compulsion to identify and sit still', he writes, for 'the purpose of such attentiveness is to gain intimacy, to rid yourself of assumption' (1997: 25). In seeking to know a place, one must approach reverentially, with openness, without guile: 'the key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of belonging' (1997: 25). And intimacy is multi-dimensional, multi-sensual:

where in this volume of space are you situated? The space behind you is as important as what you see before you. What lies beneath you is as relevant as what stands on the far horizon. Actively use your ears to imagine the acoustical hemisphere you occupy. How does birdsong ramify here? Through what kind of air is it moving? Concentrate on smells in the belief you *can* smell water and stone. Use your hands to get the heft and texture of a place — the tensile strength in a willow branch, the moisture in a pinch of soil, the different nap of leaves. Open a vertical line to the place by joining the color and form of the sky to what you see out across the ground. Look *away* from what you want to scrutinize in order to gain a sense of its scale and proportion ... Cultivate a sense of complexity, the sense that another landscape exists beyond the one you can subject to analysis (1997: 25).

The relevance of such a phenomenology of place to the wider concerns of ecological thought will be obvious. Empathy with place — conceived here primarily as *natural* place — enjoins a deep concern for the processes of life integral to, and defining and shaping the character of a given place. It conduces to environmentalism's stress upon living in accordance with ethical precepts: 'a specific and particular setting for human experience and endeavor is ... critical to the development of a sense of morality and human identity' (1997: 23). It also has a political edge that, as we will see, accords with the political and economic analysis of the environment movement:

the real topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development. It is writing concerned, further, with the biological and spiritual fate of those communities. It also assumes that the fate of humanity and nature are inseparable (1997: 23).

And it privileges the insights of indigenous peoples, peoples who have not developed the sophisticated philosophies of separation from nature that so characterise western thought:

as a rule, indigenous people pay much closer attention to nuance in the physical world. They see more. And from a handful of evidence, thoroughly observed, they can deduce more. Second, their history in a place, a combination of tribal and personal history, is typically deep. This history creates a temporal dimension in what is otherwise only a spatial landscape. Third, indigenous people tend to occupy the same moral landscape as the land they sense. Their bonds with the earth are as much moral as biological (1997: 24–25).

In light of this, it is surprising that the *literature* of place has had so little impact upon mainstream ecological thought. The visceral meaning of much defence-of-wilderness direct action is hereby rendered explicable — as Chaloupka and Cawley note, 'each defense of each wilderness cites the virtues of that location' (1993: 13), insisting upon its specialness *as place*. But, among the poets and essayists of the nature/place tradition, only Gary Snyder also doubles as a widely read environment movement theorist. This is not, however, the only perspective from which phenomenological understandings of place have evolved.

## THE COMMODIFICATION OF SPACE

The most prominent developments of phenomenological insights within environmentalism have occurred in studies of the dynamics of 'place' and 'space'. Not that all 'place and space' writing merits lodgement within the corpus of environmental thought. Much environmental thought proceeds in apparent ignorance of this theoretical tributary and, conversely, not all the contributions to the study of authentic place-making that neatly complement the values of the environment movement seem aware of the congruence. Prominent among the exceptions are David Seamon, a theorist of architecture, and Edward Relph, a geographer, each of whom overtly identifies with environmentalist values (for example, Seamon 1993: 17; Relph 1981: 161–64; 187–95; see also R.B. Hay 1988; 1992), and their work is taken as emblematic of this feeder stream below.

Beyond that, not all writing on the dynamics of place and space is housed within phenomenological investigation. A large proportion of such writings fall within Marxist geography, and focus more on the production and commodification of space via the processes of capitalism than they do upon place and perception. As much Marxist scholarship perceives itself to be in *epistemological* conflict with phenomenology, and as much Marxist activism perceives itself to be in *political* conflict with environmentalism, there is considerable hostility to phenomenological perspectives generally, and environmental

critiques specifically, within much of this literature. Neil Smith's work (1990), aspects of which were considered earlier, exemplifies this position. Not all Marxist accounts evince hostility, however. Probably the best known work in this intellectual genre is David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). Harvey holds that 'there can be no politics of space independent of social relations. The latter give the former social content and meaning'. Moreover, 'the pulverization of space' is a means to 'facilitate the proliferation of capitalist social relations' (1989: 257; on the 'annihilation' of space, see also Urry 1995) — bad news for those seeking person-place relationships that are imbued with meaning.

Unlike most Marxist geographers, Harvey does not dismiss as unimportant the perceptual components of person-place relationships (see his 'grid of social practices'; 1989: 220–21), though from such a perspective a phenomenological approach to establishing the conditions for authentic place seems a futile and somewhat naive exercise. For their part, phenomenologists make little reference to Marxist analysis, though they sometimes develop critiques of the role of capital in the obliteration of special places that are not, in essence, much at odds with Marxist analysis (for example, Relph 1976: 114–17). I do not intend to pursue this bifurcation here, except to say this: whilst I consider the contribution of phenomenologists of place to environmental thought to be immensely valuable, it is a pity that environmentalism has not, to date, seen fit to explore the relevance of Marxist explanations for the commodification of space, and thus the alienation and obliteration of place.

## PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC PLACE

Applied to questions of the human-in-environment relationship, most phenomenological investigation advocates nothing more complex than seeing particular places or environments from the inside out; from the empathising perspective of a particular place itself. From such a viewpoint a place is not merely 'the sum of the various psychological, social, economic, and political forces working on an environment at a particular point in time' (Seamon 1982:131). Phenomenologies of place proceed from an understanding similar to that of the Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980). He argues that a place — and he has in mind a *human-created* place, though what he writes can also apply to places in which a human presence is less central — is dynamic, perhaps organic, and greater than its transitory individual components. Place, thus, has an *essential* quality: Norberg-Schulz (not originally) calls this its *genius loci* (literally, 'spirit of place'). To speak of a place having a *genius loci* is to assume a certain constancy through time; to see places as tenacious unities that self-perpetuate while peo-

ple and historical events come and go. Thus, the essential nature of place changes only slowly, outlasting the people (and the other life components) to be found therein at any given moment. Such a view is in stark contrast to the conventional approach to 'environment', where a place is seen to be the sum of the various components (economic, political, cultural) identifiable within finite bounds at a given point of time. Norberg-Schulz's view is that a place is essentially 'what it is'; human intervention should take account of this and only seek to modify it in a way that works harmoniously with it, rather than confronting it with aggression and discord (Seamon 1982: 131).

Edward Relph provides a different approach. Norberg-Schulz seeks the essence of place inherently within itself — in qualities that are place-intrinsic. Relph's phenomenology, by contrast, stresses the experiential bonds that people establish with place. Traditionally, studies of person-place experiences have viewed place as a context within which basic questions of survival must be addressed: hence, as Seamon notes, there has been much emphasis on such emotions as territoriality and aggression. But 'a phenomenological perspective enlarges the emotional range of feelings that attach to place to include care, sentiment, concern, warmth, love, and sacredness' (Seamon 1982: 132). Place ceases to be a mere backdrop for survival; it is imbued with meanings that transform it from a theatre of fear and struggle to a haven; a positive context for living that evokes affection and a sense of belonging. Gaston Bachelard (1969) and Yi-Fu Tuan (1974a) have written of 'topophilia', described by Tuan (1974a: 4) as 'the affective bond between people and place', and by Relph as 'a homeward directed sentiment, one that is comfortable, detailed, diverse and ambiguous without confusion' (cited in Seamon 1982: 132). To 'topophilia' can be added 'topophobia' — 'ties with place that are distasteful in some way, or induce anxiety and depression' (Seamon 1982: 132).

Relph's is perhaps the most lucid attempt to reinterpret the person-environment relationship phenomenologically (in *Place and Placelessness* 1976; and *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography* 1981). Finding the topophilia/topophobia dualism too polar, he posits instead a continuum with way-points between the extremes. For Relph, the acme of authentic place experience is 'insiderness': 'to be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place' (1976: 49). Along the continuum of insiderness and its experienced opposite, *outsiderness*, a single place assumes different meanings according to the experiences of a range of observers. Here is the major difference between Relph and Norberg-Schulz. For Relph it is not a question of place having an essential character: places will be interpreted differently by different people and, hence, will have an infinity of meanings. 'Existential insiderness' is a situation 'in which a place is experienced without deliberate and selfconscious reflection yet is full of significances'; it is the

experience most people feel 'when they are at home ... when they know the place and its people and are known and accepted there' (Relph 1976: 55). 'Existential outsidership', by contrast, involves 'an alienation from people and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging' (1976: 51). Here, then, is a dialectical view of place-meaning, one that is in contrast to the Norberg-Schulz view of place as having an essential character independent of the human observer. For Relph, the dialectic between the human observer and place creates the place. A place will be variously interpreted, and hence have no objective and universally acknowledged meaning.

It would be wrong, though, to depict Relph's view of place-meaning as entirely the product of the unmediated individual psyche, for Relph is also concerned with the *social* process of place-identification. Place has a collective identity in addition to differing but interconnected private identities. Place-perceptions are constructed within social contexts, and it is upon shared perceptions of place that Relph lodges emphasis. The stability of the character of a place is thus related to continuity in communal experience, and also to the way the community experiences and reacts to changes to place (Relph 1976: 34). Shared perceptions of change often generate community articulation of ties to place that otherwise remain latent. It is through communal response to change and threat of change that much of the sense of attachment to place is articulated. Thus, authentic place evolves, is not static, has an organic quality — and along the way it becomes infused with meaning (on this, see Harries 1993).

Gary Snyder provides a more cosmic conception of place as 'a mosaic within larger mosaics' passing, in palimpsest, through time and space (1990: 27). Such a view posits, with Norberg-Schulz, an essentiality of place, within which its human components are a reinforcing part. Snyder is with Relph, though, on the question of ritual and custom — the constructions of stylised meaning devised and adopted by cohesive communities — as crucial for 'strengthening attachment to place by reaffirming not only the sanctity and unchanging significance of it, but also the enduring relationships between a people and their place' (Relph 1976: 32–33). This is a key function of ritual: to provide the individual with a sense of being part of a larger, meaning-infused context for living. Place-attachment lessens as rituals and myths decline in potency. 'In cultures such as our own', says Relph, 'where tradition counts for so little, places may be virtually without time', cut adrift from any historical context and, in reality, 'non-places' (1976: 33).

In both our communal and personal experience of living authentically in place, a sense of deep concern for that place will develop. Simone Weil, writing in the 1950s, argued that:

to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul ... A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active

and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future (1978: 41).

The need for the assured identity that roots provide is fundamental, then; it is the equivalent of such needs as liberty, the exercise of responsibility, and civil order (Relph 1976: 38). These intangible but crucial insights into the relationship between person and place are little understood. Perhaps most significantly, they are little understood in planning circles, where the view seems to prevail that a place is no more than its people, that these are in any case endlessly interchangeable, and that the rest is mere backdrop of relatively trivial importance — best expressed in terms of 'development potential' (Relph 1976: 81, 87–89). But, according to phenomenological analysis, there is a potent relationship between people and place, within which they dialectically shape a common identity. A 'deep relationship' with place is 'as necessary, and perhaps as unavoidable, as close relationships with people; without such relationships human existence is bereft of much of its significance' (Relph 1976: 41). Though the depths of this relationship may only become apparent at times of stress, many people so identify with their place that they organise within citizen action groups to defend it against externally imposed 'making over' in the name of development. The 'home' landscape contains messages and symbols that can serve as mobilising foci for a politics of place. In such a politics places are claimed as 'public', for they are known and created through common experiences and involvement in common symbols and meanings, and the public is entitled to claim a public right, superior to the use-rights of capital, to have the prime say in determining their future.

## PLACE AND 'AUTHENTIC BEING': THE HEIDEGGERIAN LEGACY

Phenomenological theorists of place owe, and acknowledge a profound debt to Martin Heidegger. Relph, for example, has described this influence as all-embracing, its impact experienced both consciously and subliminally:

I have tried to understand and absorb his thinking, and I hope that this re-emerges in a not-too-distorted form in my own writing. Sometimes, of course, this re-emergence is self-conscious; often, however, it seems to be unself-conscious, and only subsequently do I become aware of how much Heidegger's philosophy has coloured what I have done and written (1984: 219).

Heidegger's influence is foundational then (and other strands of environmental thought also draw on him). His essential concern was to critique modernity and, from that critique, to establish a basis for living authentically. He wanted the nature of 'being' to be recognised as the

central question of philosophy, specifically a non-abstract conception of being as things in their particularity, their 'reality'. For Heidegger the question of being is not a metaphysical one; it is a question of how we 'dwell'. The abstracted preoccupations of post-Enlightenment modernity blind us, render us indifferent to the question of being. Our most urgent need is to overcome that indifference.

Heidegger's potential link to radical ecological philosophies will be apparent. To take an example, the arguments mounted in defence of tropical rainforests are usually utilitarian: tourist potential, or yet-to-be-discovered food sources or medicinal products. In the Heideggerian position, by contrast, with the emphasis placed upon 'authentic being', everything has a right to 'be' in the way in which it is proper for it to be. Much recourse can be had — and has been had — to such a position when attempting to find a philosophical grounding for ecocentrism (for example, Evernden 1985a: 60–72; C. Taylor 1992; Zimmerman 1983. There is a negative side to this, too, considered below.)

But it is within attempts to philosophically ground a defence of valued places against the obliterating dynamism of the capitalist market that Heidegger's impact has been most deeply felt in environmental thought. Heidegger's central concept of 'dwelling' is important here.

To dwell authentically is to dwell in place. It is to dwell within one's home. As Heidegger sees it, the essential character of modernity is homelessness; and we are doubly homeless, because not only are we estranged from home but we do not know that we are estranged from home. This is why we readily tolerate the obliteration of places we hold in affectionate regard. We feel pain and loss; but we are unable to find a reasoned justification for our pain or a reasoned argument against the right claimed by developers and governments to impose pain and loss upon us. We need to become aware of the responsibility that dwelling entails. In Sikorski's words, 'to dwell, in its most profound sense, is to preserve things in their peace, to spare them actively from anything that might disturb them, make them different from what they are', and this requires of dwellers that they be 'Guardians of Being' (1993: 32). The responsibility is one of 'sparing'. 'Sparing' is 'a tolerance for places in their own essence'; it is 'a willingness to leave places alone and not to change them casually and arbitrarily, and not to exploit them' (Relph 1976: 39). Put otherwise, sparing is 'the kindly regard for land, things, creatures, and people as they are and as they can become' (Seamon 1984b: 45). An essential aspect of human living is, then, to help maintain the world's processes of evolutionary change; the time-worn assumption that our role is to help ourselves to the world should now be jettisoned. Our task is to care for places, even 'through building or cultivation, without trying to subordinate them to human will ... It is only through this type of sparing and care-taking that "home" can be properly realized'. This is what it means to 'dwell', which is, for Heidegger, 'the essence of human existence' (Relph 1976: 39).

A place about which one feels so deeply must become what Evernden (1985a: 63–65), Relph (1976: 38), Tuan (1974b: 241–45) and others — after Heidegger — call a 'field of care', and to care for a place involves more than holding it merely in affectionate regard; it also involves taking responsibility for that place. We have seen that Heidegger calls this responsibility 'sparing'; but it extends beyond a passive commitment to personally spare, to a duty to actively resist the vandalism others would inflict upon one's home. A 'field of care', in other words, entails a steward's duty of protection. To sit passively by and acquiesce in the destruction of one's home is to fail one's duty to take all steps possible to 'care' for one's dwelling.

The experience of 'home', then, is foundational — and it has largely been lost. It is:

an overwhelming, inexchangeable something to which we were subordinate and from which our way of life was oriented and directed even if we had left our home years before. Home nowadays is a distorted and perverted phenomenon. It is identical to a house; it can be anywhere. It is subordinate to us, easily measurable and expressible in numbers of money-value. It can be exchanged like a pair of shoes (Vycinas 1961: 85).

Though Relph is less pessimistic than Heidegger — hence his relationships-to-place continuum (existential insideness to existential outside-ness) — he endorses Heidegger's assessment of the need to *be*, at home, as a first-order human priority: 'home is the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling place of being. Home ... is an irreplaceable centre of significance ... It is the point of departure from which we orient ourselves' (Relph 1976: 39–40; see also Tuan 1977: 149–60). Here is Heidegger's most significant contribution to environmental thought: his insistence upon the need to live authentically, to *be* at home, and to take responsibility for the defence of that home in all its aspects — human, natural, and the intangible particulars that constitute a place's essence.

## NON-PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORIES OF PLACE IN ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT

Through the 1980s place was linked to environmental thought via the phenomenological media we have just surveyed. In the 1990s, however, the notion of place was accorded a central role by theorists working within other traditions of ecological thought, and these contributions, though not usually incompatible with phenomenological assumptions, have proceeded without reference to such frameworks.

From an ecosocialist perspective, for instance, Michael Jacobs has argued that people require the knowing of places for identity: 'people do not simply look out over their local landscape and say "this belongs to me"'. They say, "I belong to this" (1995a: 20). Like the

phenomenologists, Jacobs argues that 'the attachment to place — not just natural places, but urban places too — is one of the most fundamental of human needs' (1995a: 21). He develops this case in order to argue the radical incompatibility between place attachment and neo-liberal economics. 'The neo-liberal vision sees the person primarily as a buyer of utility: a consumer, the individual as a stomach', he writes. 'But homeness is about identity, the individual as soul'. Similarly, 'the sense of place resists neo-liberalism because it implies diversity. All homes are different; that's how we know we're home', and so 'protecting the environment is about protecting identity: the things which make us who we are, in opposition to the standardising forces of the free market'. On these points Jacobs's case is similar to Relph's, though generated from different intellectual antecedents, and presented for different political and pedagogical purposes.

In constructing a case against the free-market principles of environmental economics, Mark Sagoff also champions 'place', noting that it 'brings together human, environmental, and natural history; it is particularly valuable in helping us to understand what we deplore about the human subversion of nature and what we fear about the destruction of environment' (1993: 6–7). Furthermore, 'the concept of place applies to landscapes that do more than satisfy the consumer preferences of individuals', thereby undermining the insistence of neo-classical economics (including its 'green' variant known as 'environmental economics') that all desires, needs and impulses can be rendered as number-value market preferences. Indeed, says Sagoff, 'much of the discussion about preserving resources might be better understood in terms of protecting places' (1993: 7; see also 1992).

Ecofeminists have also theorised place. The best-known feminist theory of place, Luce Irigaray's notion of body-as-place (1993), would seem, in its deliberate de-territorialisation of the concept 'place', to be incompatible with environmentalist formulations. More promising is Susan Griffin's ecofeminist take. 'One is dependent for coming into existence not only on a mother and father but on an intricate web of life', she writes. But there is nothing abstract about this web of life; it is immediate and specific: 'one is born from the ground, the tree, the bird in the tree, the body of water feeding the roots ... all that one sees'. It also includes social immediacies: 'others in the family, each of whom contributes daily to make one's life what it is, neighbors, villagers, the farmers, the baker ... are part of one's existence', and 'in this matrix one defines oneself finally ... by a layered complexity that includes the process of exchange ... by which one's life comes into being and continues' (1995: 91). Griffin draws together a belief in the importance of the local and particular with the ecofeminist stress upon material embodiment, a fertile conjunctivity that is under threat from the universalisation — and, hence, placelessness — of post-industrial knowledge. Much is endangered or already lost: 'the knowledge of

place that is being all but erased in the technological consciousness is also a knowledge of the necessities and limitations of natural existence' (1995: 95). Griffin describes this endangered realm as 'a larger coherence to which we all belong', a coherence in which 'the rounds of birth and death from which life emanates, the rising and setting of the sun, the course of seasons, every need of the body, all partake of the infinity of natural cycles and so can enlarge consciousness to infinite domains' (1995: 96).

Some of the early ecophilosophical writings featured 'place' prominently (for example, Evernden 1978), but it remained undeveloped and fell from view. There are, however, some recent attempts to foreground 'place' within ecophilosophy. Norton and Hannon argue that 'place orientation is a feature of all people's experience of their environment'. They seek a central role for place in environmental ethics. A problem with particularising rather than abstracting ethics is that it legitimises the NIMBY ('not in my backyard') syndrome. To counter this, Norton and Hannon distinguish between 'NIMBY A: You may not do x in my backyard; therefore do x in someone else's backyard', and 'NIMBY B: You may not do x in my backyard; furthermore, if you cannot find some other community that democratically chooses to accept x, then x will cease' (1997: 244). NIMBY A, of course, is unacceptable, whereas NIMBY B is legitimate. Norton and Hannon see prospects for a new environmental ethic in such a formulation, one which involves 'an end to the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the environmental expert', with the scientist instead enjoined 'to emphasise study of local ecosystems' (1997: 245; for other recent philosophical speculation on place, see Casey 1998; Malpas 1999).

There are two other strands of environmental thought within which the particularity of place is privileged. The first of these is bioregionalism, a variant of environmentalism owing much to the reformulated anarchisms that were in vogue in the 1980s. We look at bioregionalism in chapter 9. But the current 'rehabilitation' of place owes most to its privileging within postmodernist and deconstructionist modes of thought. There have been several applications of postmodernist perceptions of place to environmentalist thought. An influential contribution is made by Jim Cheney, who argues that the postmodernist paradigm gives much credence to bioregionalism, and within that, 'the idea of place as the context of our lives and the setting in which ethical deliberation takes place', as well as giving credence to 'the epistemological function of place in the construction of our understandings of self, community, and world' (1989: 117). We will return to Cheney's essay. A second wedding of postmodernist and environmental ethics is provided by Mick Smith, who uses an 'ethics of place', which is a 'discourse of relativity, proximity, dimensionality, distances' (1997: 339), to 'counter the current enclosure of the moral field within economic and legal bureaucratic frameworks'. Postmodern



thought seeks a dissolution of all rigidly authoritative frameworks, and an ethics of place, Smith argues, 'reconnects moral and physical spaces in such a way as to subvert our present ethical agendas' (1997: 340). It does this because it is grounded in different conceptions of relationships and in specific, non-abstract interpretative frameworks.

Though postmodernism's canonical writings cannot be counted within environmental thought, the importance of local place within these writings will be noted in chapter 10. Meanwhile, non-phenomenological defences of place remain unsystematised within the broader body of environmental thought, the theories sketched above (as well as others) laying claim to a territory of still uncertain status.

### AUTHENTIC PLACE AND COMMUNAL VITALITY: AN ESSENTIAL LINK?

Much writing that elucidates the qualities of place seeks to re-establish the bonds of communal living that have been rendered tenuous under liberal capitalism.

This is sometimes more evident within activism than theory. Much green activism focuses upon the familiar 'home range', marrying notions of community invigoration with defence of communal environmental 'amenities': locally occurring wild species and their habitats, communal open space, clean air and water, and so on. Projects are promoted that are both environmentally benign and communally integrative, that endorse the relevance of the 'local' rather than assume its irrelevance. Elsewhere, I have written:

it is the alienation from home and homeness that is the most telling consequence of global technology, global communications, global architecture, global religion, global bureaucratisation and global economy. None of this is to be confused with Marshall McLuhan's 'global village'. The global village never came. Villages are human agglomerations at a scale conducive to community — but global community never came. On the contrary, along with globalisation came the antithesis of community — the atomisation of daily life. As structures, technologies, forms and processes became remote and indifferent to unique place, so society was privatised out of existence. To recover 'home' is thus to recover 'community', by which is implied not simply meaningful human interaction, but the built fabric and natural processes that are essential components of one's 'significant environment'. To fight for home and community is thus to fight the debilitating and degrading alienation that, so many contemporary prophets have rightly informed us, is the modern condition. There can be few more urgent tasks (P.R. Hay 1994a: 11).

Green activist organisations that join a focus upon local action to a concern for community refurbishment occur throughout the western world. England's 'Common Ground' movement can serve as exemplar here. Taking its name from Richard Mabey's widely read plea (1980)

for a more determined approach to countryside conservation, Common Ground seamlessly welds a concern for the human with the natural within place:

excite people ... to savour the symbolisms we have given nature, and to revalue our emotional engagement with places and their meaning, so that we may go on to become actively involved in their care. We have chosen to focus attention, not singularly upon natural history, archaeology, architecture, social history, legend or literary traditions, but upon how each of these combine to form people's relationship with places (Clifford 1994: 16).

The stress upon place-uniqueness that is evident in the work of the phenomenological geographers also emerges within the activism of Common Ground. Here, too, is the Heideggerian stress upon 'home', conceived as a primary environment of indeterminate but wider range than mere 'house'; and, in keeping with the green activist's penchant to value maxims forged in struggle rather than principles derived from abstruse theorising, this is conceived without apparent recourse to Heideggerian scholarship (King and Clifford 1987: 2–4). Nor is this an individualised conception of 'home'. The projects undertaken by Common Ground — for example, the 'Parish Maps Projects', wherein people were 'encouraged to chart the wild life, landscape, buildings, history and cultural features which *they* value in their own surroundings' (King and Clifford 1987: i) — aim at community revitalisation by generating affection for common reference points within the local environment.

There is significance, too, in the very notion of 'common ground'. What is imputed here, against the connotation of 'space' as property or real estate, is a conception of space as primarily social in character — as belonging in essence, whatever is on the title deeds to individual properties, to the community. This is close to Relph's position, wherein it is the community that gives place meaning and identity (Relph 1976: 34). It is also close to the conception of the 'commons' vigorously championed by the Ecosystems Ltd team writing under the aegis of *The Ecologist* (1993). They maintain that the notion of the 'commons' was wrongly characterised by Garrett Hardin in his classic 1968 essay 'The Tragedy of the Commons' as an open-access regime, the only alternatives to which are privatising the commons out of existence or its forcible maintenance by illiberal but ecologically benign authoritarian government. For the Ecosystems Ltd team:

the concept of the commons flies in the face of the modern wisdom that each spot on the globe consists merely of coordinates on a global grid laid out by state and market: a uniform field which determines everyone's and everything's rights and roles. 'Commons' implies the right of local people to define their own grid, their own forms of community respect for watercourses, meadows or paths; to be 'biased' against the 'rights' of



outsiders to local 'resources' in ways usually unrecognized in modern laws; to treat their homes not simply as a location housing transferrable goods and chunks of population but as irreplaceable and even to be defended at all costs. (*The Ecologist* 1993: 12. Snyder also notes this flaw in Hardin's characterisation of the commons; 1990: 35–37.)

The Ecosystems Ltd team provides perhaps the most forthright defence of communal vitality as essential to creating and sustaining global ecological health. This is because 'the environment itself is local; nature diversifies to make niches, enmeshing each locale in its own intricate web': and so, 'enduring human adaptations must also ultimately be quite local' (Richard O'Connor, cited in *The Ecologist* 1993: 16). High utopianism? Not so. The Ecosystems Ltd analysis ranges across the globe, and focuses more on the defence and/or rehabilitation of what already works than upon the creation of a new network of economic and political organisation. It remains akin to the 'Common Ground' framework of working with 'what is', and in this is to be distinguished from the utopian thrust of environmental anarchism (considered in chapter 9).

Finally, it is worth noting that this concern for community, far from distancing its proponents from the nature-focused mainstream of the environment movement, can be held to dovetail with it. Eric Katz, arguing against the quasi-Gaian model of nature as organism, posits 'community' as a superior metaphor for natural relationships, for it allows for meaning and purpose to inhere within the individual components of those relationships (1992: 58; see also Rodman 1973: 583).

### SOME PROBLEMS: HEIDEGGER AND THE NAZI TAIN; THE CLAIM FOR THE ESSENTIALITY OF 'NATURE'

An objection is persistently made to the inclusion of the themes of this chapter within the corpus of green theoretical concerns.

This consists of a rejection of any strand of thought seen to drink too deeply at the Heideggerian well, on the ground that Heidegger's never unequivocally repented engagement with German National Socialism renders him irredeemably tainted so far as any movement claiming a central place within the reconstitutive politics of a new millennium is concerned. The facts of Heidegger's practical and philosophical involvement with National Socialism are largely established. He manipulated Nazi sympathies to ruthlessly advance his academic career (Glaser 1978: 109). He supported Hitler in speeches in 1933–34, mixing 'his own philosophical vocabulary with the street language of National Socialism' (Zimmerman 1990b: 37). He never, in his lifetime, pronounced against the Holocaust. He produced an 'official story' after the 1939–45 war, in which he claimed a mere ten-month association with the Nazis in 1934, an association attributed to

'political naivete'. Subsequent scholarship has shown the 'official story' to be a fabrication, however; that Heidegger did not officially sever his ties with the party in 1934, and that he remained an active supporter of National Socialism, if a somewhat quirky one, through the 1930s and on through most of the war years (Zimmerman 1990b: 40–45).

Three questions are posed by Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism. What was there about National Socialism that induced Heidegger to throw in his lot with the Nazis? To what extent can it be claimed that his thought is quintessentially National Socialist, so that any subsequent Heideggerian philosophical influence necessarily entails a continuance of the doctrines and values of Nazism? And, as far as the green movement is concerned, does any of this matter?

The first of these questions is simply answered. Heidegger's *bête noire*, the target of his entire elaborate philosophical edifice, is the Enlightenment tradition of progressive modernity, particularly as it manifests through human-diminishing and nature-obliterating industrial technology (on this, see Zimmerman 1990b; 1994). The anti-technology theme within German Romanticism upon which Heidegger fed also influenced National Socialism, such that Nazism, like Heidegger, took aim at liberal capitalism and Marxist socialism — the two dominant embodiments of the Enlightenment progressive tradition. For Heidegger, Nazism offered 'an authentic "third way" between the twin evils of capitalist and communist industrialism', and he came to believe that it 'would renew and discipline the German spirit, thereby saving Germany from technological nihilism' (Zimmerman 1990b: 34).

The second question is more difficult. Some writers have argued that there is a seamless link between Heidegger's thought and his politics (for example, Farias 1989; Wolin 1990); some have claimed that Heidegger's thought is so incompatible with Nazism that his politics must be regarded as the dismaying folly of a political *ingénu* (for example, Lyotard 1990); others, such as Habermas (1989), Hindess (1992) and Zimmerman (1990b; 1994) take a middle path, *semi*-detaching the politics from the thought, condemning the former, and conceding value for his thought beyond the political context within which Heidegger placed it, whilst not denying a link between the two.

The latter position seems the only one capable of successful defence. Except when texts are foundational, constituting a body of received wisdom against which all subsequent contributions must be tested (as in the Bible, for Christianity; and *Das Kapital*, for Marxism), it is almost impossible to set contributions to Western thought *exclusively* within one or other philosophical or political tradition. These traditions are not tightly integrated, vertically; they are not stand-alone pillars, reaching their straight and self-generating ways through time. They interweave and cross-fertilise. There are Romantic elements, or at least elements that would reject the Enlightenment tradition of

progressive modernism, within both liberalism and socialism; just as the conservative tradition no longer locates entirely outside the Enlightenment paradigm. I am, then, much taken with the carefully articulated position of Zimmerman — albeit this is a position that he has since moved away from — that ‘Heidegger’s texts ... can be read profitably without regard to their political implications’, and that ‘his thought cannot be reduced to the level of an ideological “reflex” of socio-political conditions’ (1990b: 38). This is wise: great writings generate a plethora of interpretations and inform a wide range of subsequent political and philosophical ends. But, given the service to which he put his own thought, ‘we must learn to read Heidegger with a deeper concern about how his thought may be appropriated and applied politically’ (Zimmerman 1990b: 38). And this, too, is wise counsel.

And so to our third question: as far as the green project is concerned, does any of this matter? Yes it does. The more general question of the potential for the ecology movement to transmogrify into a form of neo-fascism will be considered later. Let me say here, though, that I do not think that general proposition to be as formidable a threat to the green movement’s credibility as is the same question-mark specifically over Heidegger, whose place within the environmental corpus is real and not mere ‘what if’. Heidegger has been an important influence upon green thought. Phenomenologies of place apart, he has been a strong presence within deep ecology (for example, Devall and Sessions 1985: 98–99), and it is largely through this connection with deep ecology that Heidegger has proven a political ‘problem’ for the green movement. As Zimmerman explains it:

critics use the potential Heidegger-deep ecology link as evidence that the latter may lean toward ecofascism. Such critics employ the following logic: Heidegger supported National Socialism; his thought is at least partly compatible with deep ecology; therefore, deep ecology must be compatible with National Socialism (1994: 105).

That there is much compatibility between Heidegger’s thought and deep ecology is indisputable. As Wayne Cristaudo observes:

the attempt by deep ecologists to popularise the idea that all existing things are part of a common seam of life, that the fate of our species is inextricably linked to our ability to participate harmoniously within our planetary network, is identical with Heidegger’s attempt to rethink beings within, and not as entities to be dislocated and torn apart from Being (1990: 302).

Yet, Zimmerman — the person most responsible for securing a prominent place for Heidegger at the deep ecologist’s table (for example, 1979; 1983) — has since reconsidered his earlier assessment of Heidegger’s deep ecological credentials, and his own commitment to

deep ecology specifically and radical ecology generally. In addition, whilst he retains a belief in Heidegger’s selective relevance to the green project, he is no longer convinced that Heidegger’s view of the human–other nature relationship is sufficiently non-anthropocentric for him to merit an ‘intellectual founder’ status within deep ecology. This is despite the existence of such seemingly unequivocal observations within Heidegger’s work as this rhetorical question: ‘are we really on the right track toward the essence of man as long as we set him off as one living creature amongst others in contrast to plants, beasts and God?’ (Heidegger 1978: 221).

Zimmerman’s reassessment of his once-strong support for deep ecology and the anti-modernism of radical ecology is still instructive:

I once believed Heidegger’s thought would provide a way out of technological modernity’s nihilistic disclosure of everything as raw material. Today, because I see that his total critique of modernity was in many ways consistent with the critique advanced by Nazism, I am more cautious about abandoning the political institutions of modernity, though I remain critical of its dark side (1994: 105).

It was argued earlier that there has been a tempering of support for radical ecology in the wake of recent assessments of philosophical ecocentrism as politically unpalatable or otherwise incapable of implementation. This trend has seen a diminution of Heidegger’s stellar position within environmental thought, because it entails a more complex attitude to both the technological and political inheritance of the Enlightenment than Heidegger allows.

Though this reappraisal has largely taken place within the context of Heidegger’s influence upon deep ecology, theorists of authentic place-making can take little comfort therefrom. The aspects of Heideggerian thought that have so appealed to deep ecology — the critique of advanced industrial technology as entailing the obliteration of authentic ‘dwelling’, and the message that we are to ‘let the earth be as it is essentially, to let beings be’ (Cristaudo 1990: 302) — are precisely those aspects that have appealed to phenomenologists of place. Moreover, deep ecology draws upon diverse antecedents: though it is faced with several recurrent criticisms, the uncertain status of Heidegger’s legacy is not the most urgent of them. Phenomenologists of place, however, are crucially dependent upon their base in Heidegger: the wider status of his thought is, thus, a question of prime concern for this green tributary. I think it wise to be vigilant against the pathological turn which Heideggerian anti-modernism can take, and did in the case of Heidegger himself. But it needs to be remembered that Heidegger was mistaken in his assessment of the Nazi position on technology. National Socialism’s anti-modernist feeder stream was ultimately a feeble one, readily — and necessarily — discarded. Far from being opposed to modernism’s project of technological advance,

Nazism promoted — and glorified — an unprecedented explosion of technological development. As Janet Biehl notes, the Nazis extolled ‘the return to simpler, healthier, and “more natural” lifeways ... even as they constructed a society that was industrially more modernized and rationalized than any German society had seen to that time’ (1994: 133). This is what fascisms are ever bound to do, for they take their energy from the demonisation of enemies, against whom as formidable a combative technology as possible must needs be deployed. Thus, Harvey describes Nazism as ‘reactionary modernism’, noting that it ‘simultaneously emphasized the power of myth ... while mobilizing all the accoutrements of social progress towards a project of sublime national achievement’ (1989: 209). In any case, there *is*, as Giddens (1991; 1994), Beck (1992; 1995a; 1995b) and others have pointed out — without embracing a politics of nihilistic despair — a profoundly negative and dysfunctional side to the modernist project. The practice of damning via the ‘logic of contamination’ (Zimmerman 1994: 105) all those who criticise the pathologies of modernism’s technological project is arguably as totalitarian in its use of smear to suppress dissent as any crudely totalitarian process of thought control, and to be rejected on that account.

A second objection to including phenomenologies of place within green thought can be made. As we have seen, most theorists of place, including those whose identification with environmentalism is overt (such as Relph and Seamon), assume a *human* environment. Though Norberg-Schulz’s ‘place essentialism’ privileges neither natural nor cultural place, the place–person dialectic described by Relph would seem to assume that ‘place’ is primarily ‘cultural place’. At least, following Heidegger, it is primarily concerned with the question of how *humans* should *be* in the world.

But against a focus on the quality of human life as the central green concern is the argument that the *foundational* green project is to guarantee, in perpetuity, the ongoing presence of ‘nature’ on earth. If this project is foundational, other considerations must be marginal within, or irrelevant to the primary project.

Robert Goodin is of such a mind. He posits a ‘green theory of value’ wherein sits a single principle upon which all else is built. This foundational tenet is ‘an abiding concern that *natural* values be promoted, protected and preserved’ (1992: 120). Goodin identifies several movement preoccupations that are needless encumbrances upon the definitive green principle of value. One of these is the concern to establish theoretical principles of right living, prominent among which Goodin identifies ‘authenticity’ (1992: 76–77). This ‘needless encumbrance’ is of concern here because ‘authenticity’ figures centrally within phenomenologically based theories of place. At one level Goodin finds little of which to complain: there is no problem if authenticity is

understood as ‘the naturalness of the processes involved’. But something more is usually intended when greens talk of ‘authenticity’:

‘authenticity’ admits of another interpretation, namely, the absence of pretence. And that rather suggests that it is not so much the naturalness of a thing’s history of creation but something else — its simplicity, its lack of affectation or contrivance, its lack of artifice in that sense — that is valued (1992: 77).

Goodin does not specifically discuss the Heideggerian tradition or the more recent literature on place and perception. His main target is the ‘alternative’ or ‘simple living’ movement. But his strictures concerning authenticity also gather up the contributions to environmental thought considered in this chapter, for these, too, are primarily concerned with establishing principles for ‘authentic’ living in which ‘authentic’ is understood as ‘lack of affectation or contrivance’. Given that the practical focus of most of the writings considered here is the human-created environment rather than the natural environment, they fall even more emphatically beyond the ambit of Goodin’s foundational ‘green theory of value’.

Nevertheless, he does provide a justification for preserving some human artefacts: ‘they can qualify for protection on account of value derived from their being part of *nature*, somehow construed’ (1992: 49). Though this seems a strange proposition on the face of it, it is arrived at in the following way: Goodin’s ‘green theory of value’, with the protection of nature as its bedrock principle, is derived from the need to set one’s life ‘in the context of something larger than yourself’. This given, ‘things that have value on account of their (purely human) history might well derive value from a source *akin* to, if not strictly identical to, that imparting value to naturally occurring objects in the non-human world’, and a case can thus be made ‘for the conservation of things in general on account of their history, whether human or natural’ (1992: 50).

From a very different perspective, Anthony Giddens also develops an argument that would seem to challenge the inclusion of phenomenologies of place in a reconstitutive scheme of thought (though this is not a position that Giddens himself articulates). The notion of ‘authentic place’ presumes stability, low dynamism, ongoing tradition. Giddens, though, argues against seeking to:

defend tradition in the traditional way. We might very well want to preserve old buildings, but we wouldn’t want to, and mostly couldn’t in any case, sustain the ways of life with which they were associated. Yet without those ways of life, the old buildings are scarcely ‘larger than ourselves’ — they are symbols of the past, relics or monuments (Giddens 1994: 212).

Giddens is critical of the repressive historical role of ‘tradition’, arguing persuasively that it is of tenuous relevance within the fluid and

rootless world of technologically advanced capitalism. Arguments along these lines are not uncommon: David Lowenthal, for instance, maintains that 'the age-old appeal to tradition is generally obsolete because past and present now seem too dissimilar to make it a safe or valid guide' (1985: 370). Giddens insists that the key questions confronting humankind cannot be answered 'through tradition, understood in the traditional way' — but that we can 'draw on tradition to do so' (1994: 217). Whilst the defence of tradition 'in the traditional way' leads inexorably to fundamentalism and is to be rejected on that account, 'succouring traditions means preserving a continuity with the past which would otherwise be lost and doing so as a way of achieving a continuity with the future as well' (1994: 48).

The imputation that can be taken from these passages (though the latter qualification clouds the issue) is that a concern for the durability of 'authentic' place articulates a conservative's nostalgia for the social rigidities (and hence, inequities) embodied within relic landscapes, as well as a Tory suspicion of the progressive forces of industrial change. It thus ideologically mislocates the value 'authenticity'. But the argument fails, I think. It may be that the 'place' of Olde England *has* been defended in terms of its embodiment of social relations that are thought to correspond to the age of British greatness. But this is hardly an appeal to place 'authenticity', for authenticity lodges in the especialness and uniqueness inherent within each uncompromised place; whereas the conservative nostalgia for place as an embodiment of past social relations generalises place rather than particularising it. Place cannot be valued in the abstract; it can only be valued in the concrete (as it were) — in the celebration of individual uniqueness. Relph insists that to generalise place is to renounce the distinctive and especial (1981: 168–75). He is at one with Annie Dillard: 'landscape consists in the multiple, overlapping intricacies and forms that exist in space at a moment in time. Landscape is the texture of intricacy' (Dillard 1976: 126).

Now, having spent much of this chapter considering the charge that Heidegger-influenced ecological thought is likely to contain the seeds of fascism, it seems appropriate to turn to the broader question of whether the 'natural' politics of the environment movement is a politics of the right.

## 7 GREEN POLITICAL THOUGHT: THE AUTHORITARIAN AND CONSERVATIVE TRADITIONS

### THE AUTHORITARIAN TRADITION IN ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT: THE 'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'

When the modern environment movement came into being in the 1960s, it was heavily 'scientific' in orientation. Its spokespersons were scientists, and its impetus came from people trained in the sciences, particularly the natural sciences. For most of these people this was an initial politicisation — few had backgrounds in conventional, let alone unconventional politics. The political pronouncements of the growing environment movement were, thus, characterised by an incongruous naivety. Exhortations to a tame politics of letter-writing and petition-collecting sat uneasily atop a devastating doomsday scientific prognosis. Some, though, quickly put such touching faith behind them — to embrace a politics that was powerfully illiberal and authoritarian.

In a sense the authoritarian tendency was a reaction against the failure of conventional political activity. There was, in the trusting simplicity of the early politics, a failure to appreciate that liberal democratic disputation has more to do with brokerage between competing interests than the search for objective truth. Politicised by the perceived urgency of the environmental crisis, the early proponents of the burgeoning environment movement assumed that they simply needed to demonstrate the validity of their analyses, after which governments would, almost reflexively, take the required action to rectify matters.

When this failed to happen, the doomsdayists concluded that democratic politics was a dismaying and unhelpful business. They turned in despair to an authoritarian politics as the only way to