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Book Reviews

Eugene N. Anderson, *The Pursuit of Ecotopia: Lessons from Indigenous and Traditional Societies for the Human Ecology of our Modern World* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 251 pp., $44.95 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-313-38130-0. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i2.241.

Most people familiar with the term 'ecotopia', or ecological utopia, first encountered it in Ernest Callenbach's 1975 book of the same name. It was actually coined, however, by the anthropologist Eugene N. Anderson, in a 1969 article concerning his discipline's role in combating the environmental crisis. Anthropologists should not just build theory, he argued, but apply the tools of their trade to reconstruct the world so that the rich no longer marginalize the poor, leaving them no choice but to degrade their environment in order to survive.

That unequal power relations are largely to blame for many of the world's ecological problems is a theme Anderson revisits in *The Pursuit of Ecotopia*. Here he dismisses arguments attributing cases of poor stewardship to mere ignorance or local resource users' inability to see beyond their short-term interests. Instead, he contends that injustice is the root cause of the global environmental crisis. Powerful international corporations, often in collusion with governments, profit by extracting natural resources while passing on the costs of their activities to the poor in the form of pollution, soil erosion, and other forms of environmental degradation. To counter these processes, Anderson recommends political and economic institutions that force businesses to pay for the full environmental cost of their activities; moral institutions that inculcate a sense of responsibility and love for the environment; and better education about the true causes and effects of environmental degradation (p. 27). Contrary to what one might expect from the title, then, *The Pursuit of Ecotopia* is not a visionary quest for that imaginary land where humans exist in harmonious balance with the natural world. It is a treatise concerning causes of and solutions to currently existing dystopias. The tone is serious, insistent. 'Without solidarity in the pursuit of pragmatic process goals for a better environment', he warns at the end of a section entitled 'Positive Solutions', 'the world will be lost and humanity will die, along with almost all other species' (p. 203).

Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in Anderson's discussion of religion. He continues the argument first made in his compelling *Ecologies of the Heart* (1996) contending that, contrary to rational choice theory, people make many decisions based on emotion rather than reason, and that religions are particularly good at calling forth such emotions. Invoking Durkheim, in *The Pursuit of Ecotopia* he emphasizes that religions also encourage social bonding, creating the solidarity that Anderson believes is essential for solving the environmental crisis. Still, while religions

typically encourage *within* group bonding, he acknowledges that religious difference can also often be a source of friction *between* groups. What we need then, according to Anderson, is something that is both emotionally compelling *and* solidarity-enhancing; something that functions like religion, but that does not pit people against each other. Although he suggests that the 'creation care' movement might be part of such a solution, he cautions against the 'fuzzy, generalized, abstract love that so many Christians and other religious and spiritual teachers have discussed and advocated over the millennia' (p. 203). In order for the love of nature to actually encourage pro-environmental behavior, he contends, people have to be intimately engaged with it. In fact, while certain religions can be helpful (especially those associated with indigenous peoples), ultimately he does not think this will be enough; we need science, too, even though it is not as effective at creating solidarity (pp. 165-66).

Continuing his critique of those who consider rationality to be the fundamental motivator of human behavior, Anderson draws on Levinas to argue that ethics derive from experience and interaction rather than from rational calculation. Part of that experience for Anderson includes the experience of the Other, in both human and other-than-human form. From this it follows that caring for the environment is a moral obligation, although it comes after the obligation to care about and for other humans (p. 179). Despite his clear concern for the natural world, then, for Anderson it is recognition of the intrinsic worth of *humans* that should underpin environmental ethics (p. 177). He is not advocating a kind of anthropocentric utilitarianism, but rather making the point that we have to solve problems of injustice among humans if we are to have any hope of solving the environmental crisis: 'social and environmental injustice is not only basic and central to the world environmental problem but is the most important single cause of it. The rich pass on the real costs of production and consumption as "externalities". These impact and ruin the poor . . . who cannot do anything about the situation' (p. 99).

In the last chapter he decides to 'completely abandon objectivity, and simply lay out [his] personal agenda' (p. 187). I was surprised to see this so late in a book filled with passion and directed to an audience who probably doubt that purely objective research is possible (or desirable) anyway. His personal agenda, as long as it is based in reason and experience rather than subterfuge or deceit, should be no problem. What does seem problematic—and perhaps this is due to the palpable sense of urgency his book projects—is that some important discussions felt unfinished. One chapter jumps from a critique of American consumerism, to a section on lawns, to a section on the ecological havoc wrought by feral animals, without ever linking these together in a satisfying way. More substantively, there is an unresolved tension between placing human well-being at the center of his ethical system, so that human needs come first, and asserting that 'we have to preserve what is left of the truly wild' (p. 187). The trick, of course, is finding the balance, but he does not investigate this more challenging ethical territory. He also argues that a basic ethical principle should be 'do no harm to any person, or by extension any sentient being, unless—at least for utilitarians—that harm is balanced by an obviously and unquestionably higher amount of good done to others' (p. 188). But can such a guideline address the majority of ethical dilemmas in the real world, where there is often no obviously or unquestionably higher good?

Anderson has an impressive command of the literature on human–environment interactions, a seemingly vast library of personal experiences from which to draw, and the passion to match. One cannot help but be inspired by this heartfelt work, even while it proffers some answers that appear to be, at best, incomplete.

References

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