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Subjective, Cultural, and Natural Ecology

Ursula Goodenough

Ecology and economy have the same Greek root – *oikos* – which means house or dwelling. Ecology refers to the science (*-logy*) of the house; economy refers to the management (*-nemain*) of the house. Curiously, “ecology” has of late come to be loosely synonymous with “economy” in the sense of managing our planetary house -- conservation, environmentalism -- presumably because “economy” has become loosely synonymous with money, profit, growth. As a consequence, these co-rooted words are perceived as pitted against one another: ecology *versus* economy.

Although *-logy* can be translated as science, it carries additional meaning. It connotes understandings that are orderly, organized, lawful, rational. This has carried over into a common, if again loose, understanding of ecology as describing a system in balance and integration, e.g. organisms and environment in harmony.

Lost in all this etymology is any clear sense of what we mean by “house.” What is our house? Wherein do we dwell?

It seems to me that we occupy 3 houses: our subjectivity, our cultures, and Nature. Hence we are called to develop a subjective ecology, a cultural ecology, and a natural ecology (and a concomitant economy for each). I cannot of course begin to do justice to such a typology-of-everything, let alone in a short article, nor am I likely to say much that hasn't been said before. But I'll offer some thoughts to get us going.

Subjective Ecology

We experience ourselves subjectively, in our mental theaters. Each subjectivity is an ongoing outcome, a vastly complex product of inborn temperament and subsequent learning, buffeted by despair and buoyed by hope. To integrate all of this into something with a semblance of balance is in and of itself a daunting and lifelong ecological (and economic) project. When it is considered that there are 6 billion subjectivities on the planet, each attempting to make some sense of itself, it is indeed a wonder that we get anywhere at all.

Every self-help book offers its own maxims for subjective ecology. I will venture a perspective that focuses on “spirit,” by which I refer to those transcendent kinds of experiences that we seek in our aesthetic and religious lives.

Our spirituality is interior, played out in our mental theaters and then attributed to various learned categories such as a magical heightening of awareness or the immanence of God. A major ecological challenge here is that our spirituality, and indeed our mentality in general, seems a thing apart from our incarnation, no matter how much we may know this to be false, meaning that we are lured by dichotomies that appear to be true: body *versus* soul, flesh *versus* spirit. What do we do with these dichotomies? How do we at once reside in these apparently non-carnate, spiritual houses and simultaneously acknowledge that they emerge from matter? What do we do with our understanding that our minds evolved from animal minds, and continue to harbor animal minds, when we are deeply biased against thinking of ourselves as organisms?

As I have opened myself to beauty and love and creativity in all of their guises, these being for me the springboards for transcendence, so too have I sought, in contemplation and meditation, the experience of myself as creature, seeking not the transcendent but the intrinsic. A friend describes this as getting in touch with his froggy self. My froggy self is uninterested in my lofty mentality. She just is, taking-in and responding, carnate, at-one. She is most at home out of doors.

For some time I focused on discovering how to access my froggy self as a separate entity, learning to let go of my subjective psyche and “let the soft animal of my body love what it loves,” as Mary Oliver puts it so beautifully in her poem “Wild Geese.” I engaged, that is, in subjective economy, managing my understandings so that both could flourish. And then, using now the concept of ecology as a system in balance, I starting to understand what subjective ecology is really about. It’s about knowing myself not as one or the other but as both. It’s about seeing my froggy self as integral to the whole, with her own ways of experiencing and celebrating reality.

This kind of ecology is not, of course, something we need to struggle and strive for. It’s inherent in every child. The dichotomies are learned. All we need to do is generate a culture in which the carnate and the spiritual essence of each child is allowed to endure and then flourish. Then we’ll get somewhere.

Cultural Ecology

My father conveyed his core philosophy to us children as a coral-reef metaphor. “Life is a coral reef,” he would say. “We each leave behind the best, the strongest deposit we can so that the reef can grow. But what’s important is the reef.” The metaphor obviously pertains to natural ecology, and I will work with it later in this context, but it also takes us to the heart of cultural ecology.

Our cultures, like everything else, are embedded in our physical and biological contexts and are grounded in our animal sociality, including our inborn capacities for nurture and cooperation and kin affiliation. But unlike everything else, they emerge as well from our collective human subjectivities. They are the outcome of mentalities shared.

Remarkably, that sharing occurs not only between living humans but also between us and those who have gone before. Like the reef, cultures build. As the artist paints and the musician composes, their works incorporate, or take off from, the ideas and images and fugal structures that have moved through time. So too for the inventor, the mechanic, the philosopher, the parent. Even as we believe that we are discarding the old for the new, that’s not what is happening. The old ideas birth the new and undergird them.

So what can we say about the cultural ecology of our times? Is there balance? Is the system orderly, organized, lawful, rational? I for one hesitate to apply such adjectives to the aesthetic and intellectual manifestations of culture, preferring to think of these as free-spirited, creative, tumbling. But they are clearly the adjectives we seek to apply to our social organizations, the antonyms being chaotic and dysfunctional.

Our cultures are most certainly under siege, the most obvious pressure being exerted by Consumerism, the dominant cultural economy of our times (and arguably of all times). As organisms we must of course consume to survive, but Consumerism, as Brian Swimme points out, is designed to make you feel bad about what you have. Get this instead, we are told, and things will brighten. Our spiritual leaders have for millennia cautioned us against such messages, but to little avail: we decry our materialism and

continue to practice it. I continue to practice it. Why? Well, because the next guy does. My neighbor has 3 cars so why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't my kids wear the sneakers the other kids wear? We know what we should be doing – restraint, redistribution, reorientation -- but we label such knowledge as idealistic, unrealistic, futile, and yes, *sotto voce*, deeply threatening to the lifestyles to which we aspire. Notwithstanding countless daily acts of human kindness and generosity, our overarching cultural ecology is hallmarked by fear and greed, neither a promising springboard for orderliness and rationality.

From my perspective, the most promising way out is to return to the coral-reef metaphor, not as something uplifting that we say to our children but as a human understanding. The reef is not about consuming; it's about adding. The reef is global even as the project is local, one polyp at a time, one deposit at a time. The polyp, of course, does not "understand" about the reef, its behavior having been sculpted by natural selection. But the dynamics of cultural evolution are not Darwinian. Cultural evolution is Lamarckian: Acquired characteristics are inherited. We and we alone make cultural choices, and they can be made quickly. We somehow need to learn to fear greed, reward idealism, and deconstruct our aversion to intelligent political and spiritual leadership. Then we'll get somewhere.

Natural Ecology

Natural ecology, we now know, achieves its balance by the continuous interplay of cooperation and competition. Birth and death are continuous, extinction is frequent, and geological and solar dynamics ultimately call the shots. Biological evolution is marked by a deep and astonishing genetic continuity, and the creatures of old have provisioned us with the likes of loam and fossil fuels. We derive, in every sense, from the past. But unlike cultural ecosystems where the present is palpably constructed upon the past, each natural ecosystem is very much an in-the-present proposition. What happens next has everything to do with what's happening now: Bring in a flood or an exotic species and the whole thing changes. Change does not necessarily mean disruption: an ecosystem may well be adapted to flooded vs. non-flooded conditions and harbor organisms that flourish under each. But the exotic species, a sudden stranger, is likely to generate an unstable and possibly most unfortunate outcome.

We are, of course, the exotic species of every ecosystem. Whereas our presence probably had little impact when we first left the trees and moved out onto the savanna, our presence is now experienced in virtually every crevice of our global habitat, generating the potential for countless instabilities and unfortunate outcomes.

Our cultural economy of Consumerism piles on here. Not only do we impact by our sheer numbers, but we impact as well because of our escalating needs. To consume is different from having a transcendent experience. The substrates for our consumption derive from planetary materials, and hence from planetary ecosystems, every last one of them.

The corals also build their reefs at the expense of the environment: minerals are extracted from the ocean and foods (other organisms) are consumed as the polyps grow and reproduce. The coral-reef metaphor does not bail us out of consumption – nothing can. But it shifts the long-term point of consumption from the size and quality of the individual deposit to the overall viability of the reef, itself dependent on the sizes and qualities of countless reef-oriented deposits.

No doubt about it: we are making a big mess, even as we point to examples where a previous mess (a polluted river) has been “cleaned up.” We basically have no idea what we’re doing as we conduct an ecological experiment of this magnitude, yet we continue to forge ahead. One would imagine, a priori, that those concerned about these things would be speaking with a unified economic voice.

But in fact there is considerable strategic disarray. One dichotomous perspective stands out in particular relief. At one pole are found those who respond to present and anticipated crises by proposing various technological solutions or at least ameliorations. At the other pole are those who decry these as “technofixes,” the argument being that technology has gotten us into our present dilemma and “throwing more technology at the situation’ will only exacerbate things further.

My sense of things is that we should be doing both. For certain proximate exigencies we need, urgently, to develop technological responses to hold things together, and some of these may continue to be useful. But we focus on the proximate at our peril. Long-term global understandings about the economy of our natural ecology must be forged and implemented, the implementations including major changes in patterns of human consumption and the value accorded to our natural world. We are terrible at anything long-term; we are terrible at self-sacrifice/restraint; we are terrible at grasping the finitude of our context. But we must somehow start getting very good at these things, and insure that our children are even better at it than we are. Then we’ll get somewhere.

Ecological Integration

We each inhabit a house within a house within a house: a subjectivity embedded in a culture embedded in a planetary context. This embeddedness means that all three dwellings must find common ecological and economic ground if they are to thrive. From my perspective, this common ground is something that should be given our largest word: a religion, where the etymology of religion (*ligare*, to bind together) serves us well here. Such a religion would honor the uniqueness of each subjectivity and articulate the search for personal wholeness, froggy and transcendent, as imperative. It would lift up the cultural changes needed to achieve social coherence and environmental sustainability. It would be called a religion, and not therapy or politics, because it would be infused with an overarching sense of our coral-reef context and the sacredness of the reef.

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