

Engaging the Transnational Corporate State: A Role for Environmental Nationalism?

By Herbert G. Reid

William Leach argues, in his 1999 *Country of Exiles* dedicated to the memory of Christopher Lasch, that a “living sense of a bounded place, some kind of patriotism beyond love of abstract principles, is the main condition of citizenship.”¹ Rob Walker, writing for a recent collection on the theme of cosmopolitan citizenship, observes nevertheless that “the notion of politics as something that occurs in a bounded space, in which peoples, movements, ideas and technologies can be contained, has come to seem rather strained.”² Perhaps what we have been seeing in the political struggles “since Seattle” is a new ecological citizenship connecting issues of “environment” and social justice that moves through and across political boundaries as seldom seen before in U.S. politics. Alas, we also have witnessed the monopoly of official violence deployed by our transnational corporate state as the accountability and substance of its economic globalization policies (WTO, IMF, WB) have been protested by the promising but precariously pluralistic coalition.³ At the April, 2000 meeting of the Society for Philosophy and Geography at Towson University I argued that we need to probe the new coalition’s unstable blend of strategic tendencies, especially the mix of “environmental nationalism” and “cosmopolitan citizenship.” The long-term compatibility of such elements is a tough question. Nevertheless, the first issue for 2001 of *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* includes a strong argument by a Canadian political scholar that “the retrieval of left-wing nationalism is essential in the current campaign for popular sovereignty and against

¹William Leach, *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 180.

²Rob B.J. Walker, “Citizenship after the Modern Subject,” in Kimberly Hutchings and Roland Dannreuther, eds., *Cosmopolitan Citizenship* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 198.

³Herb G. Reid, “The Resurgence of the Market Machine-God and the Obsolescence of Liberal Democracy: On Academic Capitalism as Unsustainable Professionalism,” *Rethinking Marxism*, 13, 1, Spring, 2001.

corporate globalism.”⁴ Hard-bitten veterans of U.S. political struggles may well wonder if combining what Laxer calls “positive nationalisms” with “inter-national, people-to-people solidarity” is not extraordinarily challenging.

At Towson I pointed out that in 1995 at least three important studies had been published especially relevant for the huge task of mapping the political geography of the new resistance to the transnational elitism driving economic globalization and negotiating the new political boundaries involved. Journalist Michael Lind’s book,⁵ with its critique of a largely white “overclass,” sufficiently disturbed the editors of *Newsweek* to make it the feature story and target for their July 31, 1995 issue. In the same year, political theorist William Connolly brought out his study.⁶ The third 1995 study by Arran E. Gare, an Australian philosopher of ecological politics, most clearly set the agenda for my talk.⁷ Gare, while decrying the fragmentation of postmodern consumerist culture and sketching a “new grand narrative, the global struggle for an environmentally sustainable civilization,” also offered the innovative argument that to get there politically against the power of global capitalism, it would be necessary to “develop an environmentalist form of nationalism.”⁸

Gare raises what may be the crucial question: “what kind of political action can be efficacious in a postmodern world?” He does not see a way around “strong nation-states committed to subordinating the operations of the market to politically defined ends...” He refuses globalist notion of a necessarily powerless state as a block to the surest path to confronting “the destructive imperatives of the world economy” promoted by transnational corporate power and rationalized by the neoliberal ideology of the global free market. Politically constituting this challenge will require the development of “an environmentalist form of nationalism to subordinate the discursive formations which are dominating people’s lives, to counter the power of global capitalism,

⁴Gordon Laxer, “The Movement That Dare Not Speak Its Name: The Return of Left Nationalism/Internationalism,” *Alternatives*, 26, 1, January-March, 2001, p. 2.

⁵Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

⁶William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁷Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Routledge Press, 1995).

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 139-163

and to move large numbers of people to action.”⁹ Gare’s amazing portrayal of a postmodern, environmentalist nationalism moves back and forth between “affluent core economies” and Third World countries. In the latter context, he would hope to build on Third World nationalism while here and elsewhere there would be an integration of regional forms both within nations and extra-nationally. Enlisting Daly and Cobb’s *For the Common Good*,¹⁰ Gare envisions the world’s global regions aiming at economic self-sufficiency and steady-state economies.

It is a “multi-leveled nationalism” indeed that anticipates commitments to regional communities *and* the development of national cultures while democratically engaging problems of international justice! “The question then is one of justice, of appropriately acknowledging the uniqueness and significance of each level of the communities of which people are part.”¹¹ And “justice” for Gare entails the “appropriate recognition and acknowledgment of all beings...”¹² He wants to approach political issues and policy questions from the perspective of a postmodern cosmology grounded by the philosophy of process and postmodern science.¹³ In fact, it would seem that Gare is attempting to provide a new politics for the proponents of “deep ecology” and “postmodern environmentalism” generally.¹⁴ To sum up, Gare’s political agenda for environmentalists in the affluent nations focuses on the moving the middle classes beyond their cosmetic environmentalism to “a nationalist struggle against global capitalism and its quislings.”¹⁵

The political challenge and opportunity that exists from Gare’s perspective is at least suggested in an increasing number of studies. As a historian writes, “A business elite with a transnational focus will find certain uses for the American state, but it has little need for the

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

¹⁰Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

¹¹Gare, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-153.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 114-132.

¹⁴Herb G. Reid and B. Taylor, “Embodying Ecological Citizenship: Rethinking the Politics of Grassroots Globalization in the United States,” *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, 25, 4, December, 2000.

¹⁵Gare, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

nation.”¹⁶ Michael Lind goes further than most in challenging what he describes as the multiculturalist notion of the United States as a federation of races or multinational democracy and the democratic universalist conception of the U.S. as a post-national idea-state (or nonnational democracy). Lind bluntly claims that the U.S. “has been, is, and should continue to be a liberal and democratic nation-state.”¹⁷ For Lind, our current Third American Republic “is plutocracy tempered by tokenism,” a state of affairs obscured by multicultural liberalism which compounds the old problem of a fragmented, ineffective majority exploited by a more or less unified elite, his largely white Overclass.¹⁸ Lind says that when we look “behind the Potemkin-village facade of Multicultural America, with its five separate-but-equal races and its decorative racially authentic folk art, the American oligarchy is quietly cannibalizing the remnants of mid-century New Deal America to construct its own enclave society, an America-within-America, linked to the global economy and detached from the destiny of the American middle class.”¹⁹

Space limitations preclude consideration of Connolly’s analysis here but at Towson I noted that while Connolly and Lind share a similar critique of “the politics of welfare liberalism” (late 1960s to the present), Lind’s proposal of a liberal nationalism would seem from Connolly’s perspective to run the risk of triggering a “fundamentalism of the state” that constitutes “the most dangerous fundamentalism of our time.”²⁰ The appeal of state fundamentalism to some white male workers caught up in what Connolly calls a “culture of social revenge and hypermasculinity,”²¹ is a prominent aspect of the problem. Michael Lind’s warning about the possible development of a right-wing multicultural regime cementing the separation of races by class would seem to be borne out by key aspects of George W. Bush’s re-election strategy.

Lind’s book, however, appears to completely neglect environmental nationalism as a possible avenue of political development which, in the context of the growing global crises mentioned, seems crucial. Is it possible to forge a viable democratic alternative by combining Gare’s environmental nationalism and the

¹⁶David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 149.

¹⁷Lind, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 131.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 113.

liberal nationalism of Lind? Or, is the folly of such an approach evident from Connolly's analysis of the interplay of pluralism and fundamentalism in an American state that historically has unleashed forms of violence that strain the credibility of its favored narratives? As Connolly says, the "territorial state too often stifles democratic energies or translates them into national chauvinist sentiments."²² Nevertheless, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it:

Weak states are precisely what the new world order...needs to sustain and reproduce itself. "Quasi-states" can be easily reduced to the (useful) role of local police precincts, securing a modicum of order required for the conduct of business, but need not be feared as effective brakes on the global companies' freedom.²³

It is in this context that I have read Gordon Laxer's intriguing attempt to go beyond "left globalism and left localism," arguing that today's Lefts must drop the antinationalism they generally share with the New Right and attempt to "encompass class and nonclass movements" demonstrating that they "can represent the whole political community better than the elites."²⁴ While it is encouraging to find questions of global justice raised in the student anti-sweatshop movement, it may be more important to consider how to get there by opposing the destruction of places by the globalizing corporate state that constantly erects around us what Leach calls a "vast landscape of the temporary." On what grounds will reconsider the plight of those exiled to North America, if we are not able to more effectively articulate and oppose those processes by which millions of Americans are being made "exiles" in their "own" country, not to mention the global commons so weakly understood in our massive culture of denial? John Berger's moving essay, *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos*, engages our "century of banishment" with the familiar but still challenging claim that "Only worldwide solidarity can transcend modern homelessness."²⁵ Yet have our Lefts too quickly made the political leap from his other insightful formulation: "Without a history of choice no dwelling can be a home?"²⁶ We have heard numerous calls for

²²*Ibid.*, p. 153.

²³Zygmunt Bauman, "On Glocalization: Or globalization for some, localization for some others," *Thesis Eleven*, 54, August, 1998, p. 42.

²⁴Laxer, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁵John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 67.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 64.

“reinventing internationalism” but might it be the case that our legitimate fears of such pitfalls as “ecofascism” have led us to overlook uses of nationalism in democratic struggles? Scholars such as Laxer and Leach are raising the question of environmental nationalism which I suggest needs much more discussion and debate.

