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Introduction to Economics I with Professor Mitchell Green

Roots and Radicals: Community and the New Northwest

Abstract

During the last several centuries as the world has acclimatized to a new global economy, economic growth and increasing productivity has traditionally been regarded as a highly desirable sign of a flourishing economy. Capitalist systems seek to continually increase growth and consumption and to expand markets, despite cyclical financial crises and environmental damage that result from these endeavors. By analyzing historical sources, symptomatic social phenomenon, and literature regarding the Pacific Northwest region, this work attempts to identify and source the common ideological underpinnings of the Northwest as it is today. In exposing the Northwest's history and political composition as unparalleled and examining its history of intentional communities, it becomes clear that the unique way in which Northwest peoples choose to resist the environmental, economic and social tolls imposed by capitalist society may offer insight for solutions to avert these crises in the future, if applied on a larger scale to the region's existing socio-economic structure. If these principles can become widely applied and demonstrated in the Northwest, the conclusion of scaling back economic growth as a counter-point to capitalist expansionism could potentially be applicable in other regions as well as the global economy faces new challenges regarding overproduction, environmental damage, and social inequity.

The story of Anglo-American settlement in the Pacific Northwest is a familiar one in which man pits himself in a battle against nature for the victory that is civilization. It is the story of rapid economic growth under capitalism and the social and environmental tolls that inevitably result from unregulated economic growth and industrialization. In this paper, the unique radical heritage of the Northwest is examined; as well as how its history, politics, ecology, and mythos come together to offer an ecological and communitarian answer to problems that arise from normal capitalist relations. Long a part of the Northwest narrative, radical communitarian ideas may be key in changing the way we think about our own communities. By examining the principles of communitarianism and their application in the Northwest over more than

a century, perhaps we can better understand how to create large-scale sustainable socio-economic systems that are so desperately necessary in these times of economic and ecological crisis.

In the late 1800s, propaganda published in the Midwest promoted the Northwest region aggressively, touting its abundant timber and mineral wealth. Shortly thereafter the region experienced a massive boom in industry followed by unprecedented urban growth, with populations in major cities multiplying by ten, thirty, even sixty times within a single decade (Schwantes, 15). Gold and silver rushes, as well as coal, timber and iron ore mining quickly became industrialized. Unlike other regions of the United States, the growth and regional dependence on extractive industries lured large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled laborers to the Northwest to obtain wage-paying work in timber, fishing and mining. The nature of the work often resulted in rampant seasonal unemployment, and laborers found themselves shifting from one industry to another to stay employed.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a lack of local capital attracted droves of investors from outside the region, which eventually allowed consolidation within industries and their labor forces to take place. As local industrial giants continued to grow they were employing ever larger numbers of unskilled wage laborers. Amongst laborers, many of whom were forced to wait for work between seasons in miserable camp-town conditions, a sense of class consciousness was growing. The need for labor unions became desperately clear; an ideological crack began to form between wage workers and those that controlled capital as it became increasingly apparent that wealth distribution among the classes was inequitable (Schwantes, 40). In a few short years, the Northwest had become a hotbed of social and labor reform efforts on the part of its working class. As such, the perfect climate had formed for the working class to welcome the literary works and revolutionary ideas of figures such as Eugene Debs, union leader and co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World; Laurence Gronlund, lawyer and author of many works advocating socialism; and the utopian Edward Bellamy whose book *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887* envisions the future as having achieved harmony via socialization of the means of production. These men and more were prominent leaders in the struggles of the working class, whose words did not fall on deaf ears in the Pacific Northwest where local union branches were fast organizing and blue-collar publications such as *The Socialist* began appearing by the early 1900s.

It was precisely at this time too, as the Northwest swirled in the tides of radical ideology and progressive social movements, that the first intentional communities were created. Intentional communities, perhaps more often

called communes, are the retraction of a collection of individuals from society at large in an effort to live a simpler and more egalitarian existence that centers on family, community, and nature. The Puget Sound Co-operative Colony in Washington was among the first of such communities, as was the Aurora Colony in Willamette Valley, Oregon. These communities are equally a symptom and a reaction to the destructive conditions created by large-scale production and the wage-labor system that accompanies it. Intentional communities seek to realize a desire for a less alienated, smaller-scale, natural existence, which the Northwest happily facilitates with its mild climate, abundant water and lush wildernesses. In his book *Eden Within Eden*, James Kopp notes that northwest immigrants' decision to come west "often was based on the promise of Edenic proportion that was offered..." (Kopp, 87). The popular perception of intentional communities is that they are comprised of ideologically marginal folks, utopians who simply can't face or function in the "real world"—just a collection of radicals. This is by all means true; after all, the very term "radical" derives from the Latin word for "root." Intentional communities are indeed radical in this sense because they emerge as an alternative for people to live more simply, often in accordance with certain ideals such as family, community, ecology, democracy, egalitarianism, and self-reliance; all of which are incidentally features of early human societies. The assumption that societies at this scale make can be summarized as follows: that which benefits the group also benefits the individual, thus all people perform work regardless of gender and each according to ability. Classical political philosophers and early economists such as Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith respectively argued that the nature of humankind is competitive and self-interested, and that self-interest must necessarily be facilitated to its greatest advantage by free-market competition. From another angle, even if we are to assume that the nature of man is ultimately motivated by self-interest, it is not self-evident that selfishness and competition are qualities mutually exclusive to co-operation. Despite what capitalism in our time has perhaps forced us to assume, even in self-interested endeavors, humankind is ultimately socially inter-reliant; we are just as willing and able to function as communities as we are individually. To this universal inter-dependency David Graeber (2001), author of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, lends the handy term "baseline communism"—which, he continues, forms "The ground of all human social life" (Graeber, 280).

So what are we to make of the proliferation of intentional communities in the Northwest? Their existence and numbers bring into question whether they are symptomatic of a broader cultural openness in the region to the ideologies that drive intentional communities. Perhaps it is time, then, for the

Northwest to acknowledge its unique qualities and strengths and begin actively applying community-scale principles to its lively regional economy. Already, many of the values shared amongst intentional communities have been embraced by Northwest culture for over a century. A long, radical labor history, concern for environmental stewardship and grassroots organization are some of those values embraced in the region that would seem necessary ingredients for radical changes in the mode of production—changes which are necessary to preserve the ecological quality of the region as well as its economic and social stability. Efficiency, community, and low-impact living are concepts ever-present in the region’s consciousness. For instance, recycling. Just over one-third of *Popular Science’s* rankings of the United States’ 50 greenest cities are in Oregon, Washington or California. Some other common forms of community activism include watershed councils, through which community members can cooperate to help monitor and restore the health of their local environment, and farmers’ cooperatives. Slightly larger organizations such as the Northwest Environmental Defense Center, which pursues environmental issues through the legal system, and the Sightline Institute, which publishes publicly available environmental data, also help equip policymakers and communities to form an ecologically and socially sound Northwest.

The progressivism that helped shape the Northwest is not limited to just ecological concerns but democratic ones as well; for example, recently Washington state became the first in the nation to legalize both same-sex marriage and marijuana use, while Oregon and California both offer civil unions and have decriminalized the use of marijuana. In contrast, half of all U.S. states have maintained the outright illegality of marijuana use and more than half of same-sex marriage. Popular support for regulatory legislation that limits businesses as well as secures individual freedoms is part of Northwest states’ cultural tradition and is evident even in its foundational documents, as the University of Washington’s Center for the study of the Pacific Northwest notes:

The constitution for the state of Washington, written in 1889, stands as ... [an] instance of lasting populist influence. The document reflects very clearly the concerns of farmers [and others] who felt strongly about regulating railroads and other monopolies, reducing the influence of big business on government officials, and guaranteeing the rights of individuals.

History would seem to suggest that creating a freer, more humanitarian society is plausible and attainable in the Northwest—but of course there are still impediments. One of the most crucial steps in getting closer to the new Northwest is to adopt some skepticism toward the dogma of economic growth. We must ask ourselves whether increasing output, consumption, and expansion is really the end game, or whether we are willing to take a look at our priorities and examine whether “growth,” so long dearly regarded as the ultimate goal, is really bringing about the positive changes we desire for our communities. In his book, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin takes up the question of growth, economic scale and individual happiness. He writes:

It is no longer a new age cliché to insist that, wherever possible, we must “unplug” our “inputs” from a depersonalized, mindless system that threatens to absorb us into its circuitry... loss of individuality and uniqueness, with its ultimate result in the liquidation of the personality itself, begins with the loss of our ability to contrast a more human-scaled world that once was; another world, approximating complete totalitarianization, that now is; and finally a third one, human-scaled, ecological and rational, that should be. (Bookchin, 335)

Bookchin thus highlights that the primary obstacle to employing a more socialized economic life process is that we have enlarged beyond what is natural and sustainable. Our current mode of production, by espousing an irrational obsession with growth and consumption, denies people through abstraction and alienation the indulgence of their natural social proclivities and the pursuit of their individual happiness. The Northwest has been envisioned before as the perfect platform for harmonious planned living en masse, in Ernest Callenbach’s 1975 novel *Ecotopia*. In it he imagines a world in the far future year 1999, in which the Northwest region secedes from the United States and Canada and becomes the sovereign nation of Ecotopia. With a voluntary contraction of the economy and intentionally declining population, Ecotopia is a large-scale attempt to combat the evils of over-growth, over-population and consumer culture by embracing communitarianism. *Ecotopia* can be considered an exaggerative exposé of the Northwest character in which ganja-smoking Ecotopian natives live in communal apartments, wear only recycled clothing, and bicycle everywhere and where the only form of condoned violence or weapons are those used to protect Ecotopia from the consumerist outsiders across the border. (Interestingly, it was in 1999 that Seattle famously hosted the site of the anti-globalization, anti-capitalist demonstration nicknamed the “Battle in Seattle”, which thrust the issue’s meaning

fully into global consciousness for perhaps the first time in history). Real-life underground movements for secession have been around for decades in the Northwest, with the proposed conglomeration of Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, and Idaho into a new nation called Cascadia. The Northwest as a utopia seems to be a recurring theme; the beauty and natural purity of the Northwest is perhaps symbolic of the hope mankind has of once again finding its roots. The cause for the pattern seems clear. The world has been steadily creeping toward the precipice of a new age. The turn of the twentieth century marked the beginning of unfettered, thoughtless growth and production, the scale of which has been met only by the human propensity to consume. As a race we find ourselves at a point where the functions of production have divorced from need-fulfillment and have become ends in themselves. We have stopped growing to survive and begun surviving to grow, or as Henry David Thoreau beautifully summarizes it: *Men have become the tools of their tools* (33).

Our current mode of production and consumption is unstable and destructive, as has been illustrated by the environmental and financial crises over the course of the last century. Ultimately it will become unsustainable altogether. As we grow further alienated from one another in the pursuit of expanding our economic frontiers, as we grow numb and turn our faces away from the things that make us truly happy, like equality, harmony, tighter communities, equal access to resources, balance with nature, personal freedom, and creativity, our ability to see and to prevent the looming crises on the horizon dwindles. Even if those ideals are regarded as nothing but radical, utopian pipe dreams, it should be remembered that fantasies are powerful reflections of innate human needs and problems. They are the expression of a desire to graduate from a current state of being to something better. Rather than imagining an unknown, distant future, perhaps people can look at the Northwest today and see a glimmer of a world that once was and that can be again; ecological and rational, right here and now.

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