

Permaculture and Justice¹

“It is never enough to mean well (‘fair words plant no cabbages’),
rather, it is necessary to ensure that *it gets done*.”

(Mollison 1988, 507)

This paper critically examines the permaculture approach to community and ethics leveraging feminist and environmental justice analyses. Permaculture originated as a systems design to regenerative agriculture but quickly expanded to encompass human settlements and interactions. The two originators of permaculture – Bill Mollison and David Holmgren – have both offered their visions of new ways of organizing our lives that are in harmony with nature and repair at least some of the damage done by humans. After summarizing the theoretical framework advanced by Mollison and Holmgren, I draw on feminist analyses by Nancy Frazer, Nicola Lacey, and Iris Marion Young to critique their visions, including tendencies to universalize and calls to reinstate gendered spheres. Additionally, I utilize David Schlosberg’s review of environmental and ecological justice, demonstrating that permaculture is largely anthropocentric in its approach to the protection of nature. Overall, I argue that permaculture does not actively address issues of justice – neither in theory nor in the applied movement. There do not seem to be any safeguards that are informed by the theoretical work of feminists and environmental ethicists.

This paper is written with much admiration of and appreciation for the people practicing permaculture. They are doing wonderful things to heal the earth and our communities – growing solutions where theorists mostly offer critiques. Yet, this respect is tied to concerns that too much faith in the process prevents directly addressing issues raised by theorists of

¹ This paper has greatly benefited from feedback by Kevin Bayuk, David Wagner, and Shelley Wilcox.

justice. The assumption seems to be that if we want the right thing, everything will work out just fine once implemented. Thus, I finish by outlining potential safeguards that would let the movement develop as it counteracts unjust tendencies of the prevailing culture.

1. Permaculture Approaches to Community

“Permaculture” is a word coined by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the early 1970s (Holmgren 2002, xix). At first it described an approach to agriculture: Rather than growing food in a way that depletes the soil and requires fertilizer inputs, as modern monoculture agro-business does, permaculture aims to regenerate the soil and grow food in a way that leverages natural relationships between plants². This approach requires less human input – at least after the initial regenerative steps – yet creates an abundance of food. While the original impetus for permaculture was food production, it soon became apparent that fundamental changes to agriculture would require changes to culture as well. Thus, permaculture expanded beyond its agricultural focus to incorporate human settlements and relationships through building design and visions for new communities.

Bill Mollison’s *Permaculture: A Designers’ Manual* (1988) provides the curriculum for worldwide Permaculture Design Courses (PDCs). This 576-page manual comprehensively documents agricultural techniques Mollison observed and tested all over the world though primarily in Australia. In his book *Permaculture: Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (2002), David Holmgren, the co-originator of the permaculture approach, expands on the

² Industrial monoculture-driven agro-business has depleted the soil by bleaching out nutrients, which are added back via petroleum-based fertilizers. Overgrazing, caused by cattle rangers’ thoughtless land management, has exposed soil to the elements creating a vicious cycle of wind and water erosion that further damages the soil. The first step in any permaculture garden design involves regenerating the soil by planting pioneer species that return nutrients to the soil while protecting it from erosion.

theoretical foundation Mollison laid. Since *Principles & Pathways* clarifies many of Mollison's ideas around the cultural aspects of permaculture, Holmgren's book has become an important addition to the PDC curriculum.

Mollison's book contains a chapter, Chapter 14, which outlines his "Strategies of an Alternative Nation" and forms the basis for the permaculture approach to community and culture (Mollison 1988, 506-559). Mollison suggests developing an overarching ethics drawn from a diversity of cultures and beliefs to support ways of living that are sustainable for all life (507). He thinks that we can build this ethics on a universal wish to regenerate the earth. This will enable us to accept our differences by working toward a common goal. The ethics focuses on earth repair, human rights, and our investment toward earth care and people care (508).

Mollison advocates defining a nation through a common ethics and an aspiration for a similar culture, rather than geographical connections. He envisions that relying on information-centered systems grounded on research and observational feedback will create a cooperative global society (508). Conflicts stemming from cultural differences can be avoided by focusing on a life-centered ethics and by respecting and celebrating differences (509). Mollison argues that simply accepting the source of difference will lead to our ability to prevent conflicts. Differences in ways of living reflect variations in natural environments: What works for peoples in a cold climate will not necessarily work in hot climates, for example. Furthermore, since the boundaries of these nations are fluid and people overlap – nations can span the globe – Mollison foresees that conflict will be avoided (515).

The cultural changes need to start with ourselves because we can transform our lives even while the current political systems are still in place (509). If enough people change, the

political systems will adjust as well – or become entirely unnecessary. The emphasis of the economic foundation for such a new society would be on developing skills and regenerating the soil rather than on accumulating material wealth (510).

David Holmgren (2002) specifies twelve principles that guide permaculture³: Observe and interact; catch and store energy; obtain a yield; apply self-regulation and accept feedback; use and value renewable resources and services; produce no waste; design from patterns to details; integrate rather than segregate; use small and slow solutions; use and value diversity; use edges and value the marginal; and creatively use and respond to change. I only elaborate on the three principles that are most relevant to my analysis: Principles 8, 10, and 12.

In principle 10 – use and value diversity – Holmgren (2002) outlines how this principle applies to humans as well as to agriculture. Diversity is presented as a sustainable antidote to monocultures – both in agriculture and in human cultures. Globalization, which has come with a standard set of norms based primarily on USAmerican⁴ culture, undermines other cultures. Holmgren stresses that the best antidote to both monocultures and globalization is preserving cultural and plant diversity within the context of a refocus on local, smaller areas that accepts that cultures have already changed. Instead of trying to return to a previous way of life, which is impossible, Holmgren advocates that we salvage the important pieces of what is left and create new cultural diversity out of the remaining variety.

Diversity is an important ingredient to the stability of an ecosystem. However, diversity by itself is not enough. The functional connections between species are critical for the stability

³ Holmgren provides overviews of the principles also at www.permacultureprinciples.com.

⁴ Because there are more countries in the Americas than the United States, I prefer to use “USAmerican” when referencing the United States.

of diversity (213). Applying this to human culture, the stability (or strength) of a community is not so much due to a collection of people of various races, genders, ages, abilities and so on. Instead it depends on the cooperation and collaboration between these people.

The segregation of parts leads any self-organizing system to integration. Integration is an inevitable process but we can choose (or design) the form it takes (172). Holmgren uses principle 8 – integrate rather than segregate – to suggest ways for rebuilding community. These communities will reflect the multicultural nature of globalization, which has brought people together from various parts of the world. Even if we start building bioregions this diversity can inform our new culture through cross-fertilization (173). Furthermore, diversity might be an important ingredient in cooperative relationships as too little diversity can lead to competition among people who are too alike to benefit from cooperation (176). These notions are also echoed in Principle 12, where Holmgren suggests to “creatively use and respond to change” (239). Change is an essential feature of the stability of a system, such as a culture, if we are prepared to integrate the change, rather than fight it.

2. Permaculture Ethics

Because a common ethics plays such a central role in the communal life Mollison and Holmgren envision I devote this section to a more detailed description of the ethics proposed by them. Mollison (1988) only offers a very brief description of ethics, stressing the importance of permanent agriculture more than giving an ethical foundation (2-6⁵). He describes the permaculture ethics as evolved from the idea that working with nature rather than against it helps us create peace and plenty (3). Earth care ethics develop from the realization of our

⁵ This includes a 2-page graphic, so the actual number of pages devoted to ethics is only two.

interconnectedness with nature. We also learn from our observation of nature that healthy communities rely on cooperation (3). Eventually, we expand our care for our family to all humans on the planet. Permaculture is a system that applies these evolved ethics.

Holmgren (2002) greatly elaborates and expands on the two pages presented by Mollison. He presents ethical principles from an ecologically functional view, which emphasizes the need for ethics for our survival. The permaculture ethics is derived from traditional cultures because they have survived longer than our current civilization (1). It consists of three guidelines: earth care, people care, and fair share.

Earth care is grounded in the belief that “the earth is a self-organised system” (3) often viewed as “our living, all-powerful mother” (4)⁶. Removing the spiritual overlay, Holmgren’s foundation emerges as the claim that evolution will lead to the extinction of human beings if we continue to destroy our life support system. Care for the earth is bound with living soil (the health of the soil might be the most appropriate measure of the health of a community), stewardship (calling for care that leaves a resource that is healthier after its use; land ownership is transferred to “collective structures” [5]), biodiversity (caring for “the diverse lifeforms that inhabit the earth” [6]) and living things (viewing all species as intrinsically valuable; reducing our total environmental impact; using what we kill).

Care for people starts with caring for ourselves (7). Holmgren suggests that a focus on becoming mostly self-sufficient will reduce inequitable resource depletion and therefore

⁶ This belief is based on the Gaia hypothesis, originally formulated by James Lovelock (1972), and often spiritualized by suggesting it means that the Earth is a living organism (e.g., Holmgren 2002, 71).

contribute to global equity (7). He encourages us to find ways of meeting our needs without material consumption.

The final aspect of the ethical tripod of permaculture is fair share⁷ (8). Fair share refines the notion of abundance that comes from living within the limits imposed on us by nature. We all die – a natural limit to our life. Rather than acting out of a (false) belief of scarcity, our acceptance of natural limits allows us to live sustainably. The limits set to our consumption and reproduction reflect our notion of “enough.” We can take responsibility for overpopulation by letting go of the notion that only biological children can be our children. This shift would help us see all children as our heirs (9). Through the redistribution of surplus, the fair share ethic connects us globally because we have a responsibility to share our surplus for the benefit of all (9). This redistribution can also happen to future generations by planting trees and rebuilding the soil (10).

3. Critique of Permaculture

The quote from Bill Mollison at the beginning of this paper epitomizes the concerns I will elaborate in this section: Focus on action ignores any (potential) issues that become apparent only through critical analyses. There are several aspects of the theoretical framework that especially call for such analyses: Its anthropocentrism, its universalizing assumptions and tendency to essentialism including a troubling approach to gender balance, and a general unawareness of a need to actively counter injustice. I approach my critical analysis from two

⁷ Holmgren describes fair share more elaborately as “set[ting] limits to consumption and reproduction, and redistribut[ing] surplus.”

dimensions: A feminist social justice perspective and environmental ethics. Since it is less troubling, I will start with the anthropocentrism charge.

Although permaculture is admittedly and “unashamedly” human-centered (Holmgren 2002, 6), I do not see this as problematic since its most important goal is the regeneration of the soil. The permaculture ethics, as described by Holmgren, stresses the importance of respecting the earth, including everything living on it. Although this ethics is not based on a theoretical understanding of environmental ethics, the practical claim that we have to take care of the earth so that it can continue to take care of us seems to be a departure from the prevailing view of nature as something that can be exploited without any repercussions.

Justice concerns can be raised about the permaculture ethics on several dimensions: Distribution, recognition, power/oppression, universalism, and essentialism. The ethical principle of “fair share” might be the closest to addressing distributional justice issues but it is not clear how an approach that focuses largely on local solutions can solve global distributional problems, which include environmental injustices such as disparate benefits from the exploitation of natural resources (Schlosberg 2007). While permaculture assumes that the reduced availability of cheap energy (“energy decent”) will force us to adopt local solutions, this will only reinforce injustices that already exist in these localities. For example, affluent areas of a city will have the benefit of less polluted soil, an environmental injustice localization cannot address without conscious effort. However, fair share does address intergenerational environmental justice by requiring us to consider the impact of our actions on the next seven generations (Holmgren 2002, 71).

Iris Marion Young (1990) suggests that we cannot understand maldistribution unless we understand the underlying cultural forces related to domination and oppression that created and recreate the distribution. Although permaculture is very much informed by an understanding of environmental degradation, it is lacking critical analyses of power structures, which as are, Young stresses, crucial when developing an overarching ethics. Permaculture ethics tends toward uncritically describing traditional cultures as the best models for a sustainable way of life⁸. This focus on sustainability avoids addressing any other problems with current and past status quo. By viewing life only through the sustainability lens, important problems with past communities are ignored. Especially membership and power are not critically evaluated: For example, that membership in past communities – such as the ancient cities Holmgren considers (220) – was open only to specific males is completely ignored.

To overcome oppression and domination, Young argues that we need to recognize group differences that lead to some individuals (and groups) to receive more than others (Young 1989). Neither Mollison nor Holmgren recognize the power dynamics that lead to the maldistribution in the current capitalist system. While both heavily criticize the unsustainability of this system, neither thematize other issues, especially not those regarding justice – narrowly, focusing on distribution only, and broadly construed – which greatly contribute to the unsustainability of our current way of life. This is especially troubling since Holmgren stresses that we cannot continue the current system's focus on individualism, clearly recognizing some aspects of our dominant culture that need to be critically examined (Holmgren 2002, 176).

⁸ See, for example, Holmgren's description of past multiculturalism (220)

The marginalized expository voices around race and gender should be made central parts of political theories, otherwise these theories simply perpetuate the status quo (Frazer & Lacey 1993, 214). This critique fully applies to permaculture ethics, which appears oblivious to any need to tackle difference systematically, instead advocating a common ethics that will lead to “unity in people” (Mollison 1988, 3). Although diversity is presented as something valuable (principles 8 & 10), no safeguards are proposed for ensuring differences, especially those associated with power differentials, are addressed justly.

When gender is not ignored, as it is in most of Mollison’s and Holmgren’s books, it is presented within the traditional male-female dichotomy. In Principle 12, one specific theme emerges in Holmgren’s notion of gender balance, which has very strong Victorian overtones (Holmgren 2002, 268-9). He calls for a return to “ambiguous complementarity” of the genders that forces men and women into their “separate but complimentary cultures” (274). Although he acknowledges that we cannot simply go back to “traditional sustainable culture” because of feminist critiques, he largely dismisses feminism with the claim that it has simply accepted the notion of a genderless society (269). Holmgren’s proposed gender balance is built on the belief of feminine and masculine ways of acting and being (268). He associates masculine ways with a linear view of history that is advanced by conflict and crises overcome by the action of male heroes. In contrast, he identifies the feminine with cyclical and rhythmic changes that are more in tune with nature. Clearly, Holmgren ignores the similarity between and the differences within genders (Frazer & Lacey 1993, 132; see also Tavris 1992). Despite his nod to feminism, his suggestion “preserves traditional values,” which are inherently oppressive to women (Whipps 2004, 121) and are based on benevolent sexism, which captures such overvaluation of

women as nurturing and warm (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu 2002). While it might seem to counterbalance the patriarchal emphasis on male attributes, it prevents the development of an approach that moves beyond the gendered dichotomy, which is built on the assumption of an essential nature of each gender.

Young (1995) suggests that underneath claims for community is a metaphysics that drives a universalizing unity, which moves difference into a remainder that is not acknowledged. This critique is most applicable to Mollison's vision of an underlying universal ethics, which reflects the ethical majority (Mollison 1988, 508). Nowhere does he acknowledge the possibility that not all peoples would agree to the priorities set by his global ethics. The assumption of the common ethics comes from a perspective of affluence revealing ignorance of class difference. If our basic survival needs are met, it is easy to accept care for the earth as the most essential social goal. However, if we do not even know where we will get food for our next meal, care for the earth might not seem as urgent. Thus, an ethics needs to recognize and accept different social goals, rather than universalizing one. A community blueprint needs to ensure that the voices of all are heard - and that cannot happen when we start out from a presumption of a universal social goal (Young 1989). While Holmgren seems to regard such diversity as an important ingredient for successful communities – arguing that a homogenized community is not stable (219) – he views it as the basis for an integrated whole thus perpetuating Mollison's universalizing (165).

The final critique is the lack of a roadmap. Chapter 14 does not provide a description of how to get to Mollison's vision from today's reality, which suggests that he seems to assume that we can simply achieve his vision by pointing out to people our common interest in saving

the soil, which leads to our common ethics (508). He even presents the region as the “place where we develop our culture” (Mollison 1988, 510), as if that is something that can happen without the influence of existing culture. At bottom, he does not develop a way to get from “here to there” (Young 1995, 234).

4. Permaculture in Action

The concerns outlined in the previous section, especially the lack of thematizing justice, become more apparent when we look at applied permaculture. In this section, I briefly present two projects that exemplify this unawareness: City Repair in Portland OR and the Transition Town movement.

City Repair is using a technique called placemaking (City Repair 14). This process reclaims intersections as communal spaces and brings neighbors together through the work of redesigning these intersections, building community and laying the groundwork for “participatory democracy” (City Repair 15). Just as permaculture, City Repair celebrates and encourages diversity across “a wide range of ethnic diversity, race, age, ability, sexual orientation, economic status and life experience that give individuals distinct perspectives” (City Repair 38). Encouraging diversity is not enough, though, since our modern neighborhoods lack diversity. City Repair appears unaware of this impact of modern living. This lack of awareness is further reflected by the absence of a critique of the power dynamics leading away from diversity (Young 1990). There is no analysis of who benefits from the lack of communal space, nor is there a vision of community beyond transforming the grid. Such a vision could leverage the participatory democracy practiced in City Repair by reaching beyond current neighborhood boundaries, which are defined by class and race, truly creating diversity.

Similar problems emerge in the Transition Town movement, which originated in the UK to prepare communities for the depletion of natural resources, such as oil and gas, and the impacts of global climate disruption. The originator of the movement, Rob Hopkins, is trained in permaculture and incorporates the principles into his community designs (2008). Diversity is an acknowledged issue within the movement, which is largely represented by white, middle-class males (Cohen 2010). Yet, there seems to be a lack of commitment to change, often because diversity is viewed as an extraneous issue, not as important as the preparation for descent – the economic downturn predicted to be triggered by natural resource depletion – and climate change. Stressing the importance of diversity to the resilience of a community, as Holmgren reminds us, could diffuse this resistance.

Both these applications provide important critiques along other dimensions: They question and counteract the prevailing models for city design, which largely isolates, and our overdependence on the availability of cheap energy. This suggests that there is much in permaculture that provides tools useful to anybody fighting for justice. Localization, despite the problems outlined, enables us to rebuild civic society (Dagger 2003). It strengthens neighborhoods, as City Repair does, which can form the building blocks for a revitalized democracy. Most importantly, permaculture provides an alternative to the globalization of agro-business with its slew of injustices and disrespect of other cultures. Food can be produced without destroying the soil, ensuring intergenerational justice. A move toward more self-reliance can be empowering for people and communities. Because of these advantages, permaculture should not be simply dismissed. However, it is imperative to implement safeguards into the movement to overcome the issues presented in this paper.

5. Potential Safeguards

The elements for integrating justice concerns into the permaculture ethics are already present. Clearly, there is no resistance to diversity, for example, so most of the issues I raised might be more reflective of an unawareness that justice has to be actively ensured. It does not happen automatically. Just like Young (1989) calls for safeguards for participatory democracy, permaculture needs to incorporate active measures that counteract the social structures that perpetuate injustice. In this section, I will briefly delineate some possible safeguards that could be implemented into the permaculture movement to ensure its diversity. As with any permaculture project, it will be important to observe and interact to ensure that the safeguards are working (principle 1). A simple yardstick for success might be a visual check of the diversity in the movement: Are there people of all races, genders, classes, cultures, relationship status, bodies, etc. represented?

As I pointed out in section 3, permaculture theory is uncritical toward most issues of injustice. Acknowledging that there are power differentials is absolutely crucial for moving beyond their influence. In addition to understanding justice along the dimensions of distribution *and* recognition of oppressed groups, injustice can only be addressed if all affected parties participate equally (Schlosberg 2007, 16). This requires actively ensuring participation, such as through the participatory democracy Young (1989) outlines. Developing a structure for active participation could also take the form of the “dialogical communitarianism” presented by Frazer and Lacey (1993). This communitarianism is built around open dialogue amongst all people involved in a society, respecting the plurality of voices and honoring diversity. This approach incorporates the permaculture principles 10 (use & value diversity) and 4 (accept

feedback), allowing for the design of feedback loops into the further development of the underlying theoretical assumptions as well as the application of that theory in the movement. The central process of dialogical communitarianism is consciousness-raising both formally in groups and informally, something permaculture could benefit from greatly. Once some people understand the linkages between prevailing discourses, inequality, and oppression in the dominant culture as well as in the permaculture movement, they can formulate new discourses that then can form the foundation of a just world based on permaculture principles.

Fundamentally, the permaculture movement needs to address Mollison's assumption that fair words plant no cabbages. While that may be true, getting things done justly requires more than planting cabbages. It requires a design that ensures fair distribution: Everybody gets enough cabbage. Such fair distribution cannot happen without the recognition and participation of everybody who needs to get cabbages.

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