

Linda Sargent Wood. *A More Perfect Union: Holistic Worldviews and the Transformation of American Culture after World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. iii, 339 pages.

Linda Sargent Wood, a historian at Northern Arizona University, has produced a creative history of post-World War II American culture by centering it on the idea and manifestations of holism. She argues, in fact, "this holistic worldview, which in this era was markedly communal and often utopian, was one of the most powerful perspectives to direct Americans in the postwar period. Such understandings provided the intellectual underpinnings and emotional fervor for many of the great dreams that informed the era and fundamentally altered American history" (p. 6). She approaches the topic through five individuals and one institution, each the focus of a chapter in the book. The diversity of these subjects demonstrates well the wide extent of holism in various walks of American life at this time, while their interconnections suggest the multiple ways holism converged. *A More Perfect Union: Holistic Worldviews and the Transformation of American Culture after World War II* prompts a consideration of wholes and parts, communities and individuals, the global and the local.

The book is perhaps not the usual fare for *Environmental Ethics* readers. Only one of the subjects, Rachel Carson (1907–1964), is commonly associated with environmental ethics, and only indirectly so. However, in entangling and disentangling each subject's ideas, connections, and implications, Wood makes a strong case—even if implicit—that holism's roots and branches offer a compelling vision for environmental (and social) ethics. Wood brings together a unique cast of characters through which she probes deeper, larger meanings.

The book begins on what will be the most familiar ground for readers of this journal: Rachel Carson. There are multiple ways scientists and writers have depicted nature. For Carson, though, nature was unified, communal, and interdependent (p. 27). Carson eschewed the individualistic views of nature, focusing instead on ecological communities. Moreover, nature was larger and beyond human control. Attempts to control nature, inevitably in Carson's view, led to imbalances and disruptions in natural systems. Thus, humans needed to deploy humility and respect for that world, requiring a tempering of their scientific and industrial systems. An egalitarian, holistic vision of nature, thus, expanded to a more cooperative view of society at large.

Next, Wood turns to R. Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), the quirky architect most famous for the geodesic domes that dotted the landscape, especially in counterculture corners. As many before him had also hoped, Fuller trusted that technology could free people and, if managed correctly, could improve or ameliorate humans' degrading influences on nature. A holistic thinker, Fuller sought in his geodesic domes, manipulable global maps, and peace-promoting World Game to promote a sense of global interconnections. As Wood describes it, "Fuller's focus on whole systems and the connections between the parts and the whole supplied a seedbed

for ecological design, alternative technology developments, and sustainability initiatives" (p. 56). Seeking designs that followed from nature, Fuller worked to create practical and technical solutions to postwar problems. Technology, Fuller fervently believed, would heal rifts between humans and nature and even forge a harmonious blending through the built environment (and more).

Turning to Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), Wood describes the holistic human society the civil rights activist called the "beloved community." Pushing beyond a focus on his activism, Wood pitches King as a holist—one who believed in the whole person integrated into a human community upholding dignity. His theology and politics were infused with communitarian ethics (p. 98). Although King's focus was a far cry from Carson's or Fuller's interests, the social world certainly required holism to fulfill an environmental ethic.

If King added community to natural and technological holism, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) contributed time. Teilhard, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist, became known as the "evolution priest" for his convictions that God drove evolution and that matter and spirit were united (p. 111). Further, Teilhard held the teleological view that the world moved toward what he called the "Omega Point," when all would harmoniously converge (pp. 117–18). Censored by the Church, Teilhard studied a holistic, interdisciplinary science he called "geobiology" (p. 128). Together, his holistic and cosmic spiritual and scientific approach inspired a wide range of New Age thinkers; according to one study, Teilhard stood as the most influential figure in those circles. Back to deep time and forward to the Omega Point, Teilhard envisioned a holistic and harmonious social and natural world.

While Teilhard and the others focused on larger forces, noted humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) concerned himself more with self-actualized individuals. Maslow drew from myriad influences in his focus on individuals' symbiosis with society and the emphasis on human potential and peak experiences. Not surprisingly, Maslow was influenced by Gestalt psychology, a field that posited the mind-perceived reality in terms of wholes. Reductionism in psychology (and all sciences), thus, failed to capture adequately the human spirit. Maslow aimed to understand positive human traits rather than neuroses and developed his famous hierarchy of needs with self-actualization as the apex. With that as the key human motivator, Maslow envisioned a positive, sustainable, holistic human community, or eupsychia in his terminology.

Wood ends her book with an application of holistic ideas at the Esalen Institute, established at Big Sur, California, in 1962. A center promoting self-discovery, Esalen hosted spiritual leaders, psychologists, and others who "saw themselves struggling against individualistic, competitive value systems and hegemonic pursuits" and sought to "negotiate the fragmentation" of the modern world in holistic ways (p. 170). Wood treats Esalen as the zenith of holism, a place where practitioners and seekers met to explore, extend, and create harmonious relationships. However, as happened with so many countercultural adventures, Esalen easily slipped toward individualism: "ideals of a community-oriented and globally based holism metamorphosed into concentrations upon the individual" (p. 197). Accordingly,

Esalen stands also as a testament to the historical tension between communalism and individualism so apparent throughout American history.

What Wood's historical figures seem to have in common is a deep-rooted belief that Western society had created a dysfunctional relationship with the world, a relationship that is in need of serious rethinking. Responding to a post-WW II sense of a "fragmented world" (p. vii), these five figures and one institution (among so many others of this era) focused their life's work on healing the divisions that humans had built between themselves and between humans and the nonhuman world. The goal was a more harmonious life with the planet and the rest of humanity. The goal was a world where racial divisions were healed. The goal was a world where human beings were whole or healthy in spirit, mind, and body—or at least where a human being was not reduced to one dimension.

These historical figures and others thought of the world in holistic terms, employing Aristotle's most basic sense that "The whole is more than the sum of its parts" (p. 13). Sensing that various forms of dualistic thinking were the root cause of our contemporary disharmonies, Wood's subjects rejected such thinking. In place of dualisms between humans and nature, spirit and body, near and far, sacred and mundane, male and female, reason and emotion, they created a larger meta-dichotomy. The world that is dysfunctional, but dominant, is a world that is mechanistic, individualistic, reductionistic, dualistic, a world dominated by disequilibrium, disturbance, and a fixation on homogeneity. The ethical manifestation of this dominant metaphysics of nature was hubris and an obsession with anthropocentrism. The preferable reality is focused instead on unity, community, equilibrium, interdependence, heterogeneity, relatedness, integration, balance, harmony, embeddedness, systematic thought and action, and organicism. The ethical stream flowing from this metaphysics is headwatered in peace, humility, communitarianism, and nonanthropocentrism. In the creation of this meta-dichotomy, we repeatedly see thinkers who express faith that a new "holistic order would provide a new map of morality" (p. 107), thinkers who sensed that ethics were not free floating and untethered but instead inspired by our visions of reality. In short, "if one adopts a notion of the earth as living, active, and alive, then how we treat it calls for different moral considerations than if we think of the world as an inanimate machine" (p. 45).

These worldview differences were perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the emergence of a different purpose of science. The agenda for America's post-WW II commitment to a mechanistic science was set by Vannevar Bush's famous whitepaper, "Science: The Endless Frontier" from 1945. "To secure a high level of employment, to maintain a position of world leadership—the flow of new scientific knowledge must be both continuous and substantial," Bush wrote. Science, for Bush, gave us the ability to predict and ultimately control nature for narrowly defined human ends.¹ Wood's post-WW II scientists, however, envisioned a different role for science,

¹ It is important to note, however, that Bush was not as myopic as many of those he inspired. He warned, "It would be folly to set up a program under which research in the natural sciences and medicine was expanded at the cost of the social sciences, humanities, and other studies so essential to national

evolving out of a different, a holistic, worldview. For Carson, the study of nature allowed us to glimpse "a nature that was awe-inspiring and enchanting, resilient, containing within it the power to endure tumults . . . not a nature 'red, in tooth and claw' but harmonious, balanced, filled with beauty, mystery, and wonder" (p. 25). For Maslow, "Science at its highest level is ultimately the organization of, the systematic pursuit of, and the enjoyment of wonder, awe, and mystery. . . . Not only does science begin in wonder; it also ends in wonder" (p. 151).² This was an ethically profound distinction. Science premised upon the prediction and control of nature is perfectly consistent with an ethic obsessed with subduing nature for human ends, an ethic where at best we make sure we understand how to take from nature without infringing upon our future ability to take from nature (what some, perhaps cynically, see in sustainability). But science premised upon the generation of wonder about the natural world is perfectly consistent with an ethic obsessed with respecting nature for its own sake and acting from a sense of humility, an ethic where we instead consider how we can meet our own needs while inflicting the least amount of harm on nature's wonders (what some would like sustainability to mean).

The success of a book such as this depends on a number of smaller successes. The first necessary success might be definitional, clearly articulating what exactly it is that so transformed American culture. Wood herself acknowledges holism's "literal meaning is slippery" (p. 15)—a confession that, while accurate, creates a serious challenge for her project. She defines and characterizes it in various ways. First, holism seems to be mainly an epistemological and metaphysical concept: "a view that holds that reality can only be understood as a whole, can only be understood by focusing on relationships between the parts and the whole" (p. vii). But its identity shifts. Wood describes it as a "perspective" (p. vii), a "sensitivity" (p. vii), an "intellectual framework" (p. 5), a "worldview" (p. 5), and an "intellectual tool" (p. 211).

So, besides an epistemological/metaphysical concept, Wood and her historical figures consider holism as ethically and politically relevant. Wood demonstrates that her subjects employed holism as a normative tool, a way to chastise certain institutions and ethics and embrace others. Moreover, many of them were also attracted to the idea that holistic entities, or collectives (from species and ecosystems to humanity as a whole), were proper objects of direct moral standing. However, neither Wood nor her historical figures appear to understand that they are making this move from the epistemological/metaphysical to the ethical, nor do they seem to offer anything resembling a formal argument for how the latter is derived from the former, nor do they appear to appreciate the seriousness of the challenges to holistic ethics.

There is one point in the book where Wood glimpses a possible darker side of

well-being." Vannevar Bush, *Science The Endless Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), chap. 4 (<http://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/nsf50/vbush1945.htm>).

² See Mark Fiege, "The Atomic Scientists, the Sense of Wonder, and the Bomb," *Environmental History* 12 (2007): 578–613.

holism. She recognizes that some thinking of Nazi Germany too could be called holistic, a subordination of the parts to the whole (p. 14). Likewise, an unfettered or radical holism, one suggesting, as does Teilhard, that "the earth was progressing into a unified, harmonious whole . . . that everything in the universe was being amalgamated into one integrated whole," seems quite different from a holism suggesting that the well-being of humans, for instance, is entwined with the well being of the nonhuman world. Each might have different ethical implications as well, not all of which might be comfortable or worth striving toward. These issues, however, are not unique to Wood's presentation or the thinking of her historical figures. They are, rather, endemic to discussions of holism more generally.³

Similarly, there are a number of other, admittedly minor, miscues in the book that reflect struggles in environmental thinking more generally. For example, there is the perennial equivocation on the term *anthropocentric*, sometimes employed to mark an ethic attributing direct moral standing only to humans (p. 43) and at other times to mark the sense that humans are the ones who need to act quickly to avert environmental harms (p. 44).

There are also moments where a historical figure's commitments seem to be in tension with their commitment to holism. Buckminster Fuller, for example, displayed a commitment to prefabrication that might be viewed by some as the epitome of reductionism at least in the production process. Fuller displayed an almost unreflected-upon commitment to technology ("Linking technology to nature formed the heart of his holism" [p. 74]) that earned him rebuke from the American Institute of Architects who called his Dymaxion House "machinery, not architecture" (p. 65), and who went on record against his prefabrication on the grounds that it was "inherently opposed to any peas-in-the-pod-like, reproducible designs" (p. 65). Admittedly, the problem here might be with the concept of holism or with those who apply it rather than with Fuller's work. Moreover, Fuller is but one of many, such as Lewis Mumford, who saw a pathway to linking, even merging, technology and nature. But this challenge reveals the difficulty of tying a cluster of thinkers together around a "slippery concept." In a similar vein, Wood herself takes issue with what she calls Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "patriarchal perspective" (p. 96), a challenge to one of her own figures that, if her case were more convincing, might disqualify King from inclusion as a holist.

At times there are terms, ideas, and assertions dropped in to the text but not clearly explained. For instance, Wood attempts to illustrate the thought of Fritjof Capra by explaining that he was influenced by "Gaia hypothesis, ecofeminism, deep ecology"; yet, she never explains what any of these are (p. 188). She illustrates the dietary preferences of the Esalen Institute by making a reference to "Grahamism," again without any explanation (p. 191).

American politics, the contemporary American university, and our current approaches to environmental problem solving might all stand as stark reminders that

³ For similar thinking in another context, see Michael P. Nelson, "Teaching Holism in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 32 (2010): 33–49.

we are a long way from holistic thought and action—that American culture has arguably yet to be transformed. Wood herself appears to be torn about the ultimate success of the holistic worldview. On the one hand, she asserts that “holistic thinking fed the spiritual renewal that marked much of American life in the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 201). On the other hand, in discussing Maslow’s eupsychian vision, Wood’s conclusion can stand in for holism at large, as “holistic projects of this era fell short as the communal ideals of the 1960s became stuck in the labyrinth of individualism” (p. 167), and her assessment of Esalen also clearly showed that a focus on the self evolved out of that holistic experiment.

Part of Wood’s conclusion is that holism’s community focus began to turn inward, and, in fact, it devolved into a self-indulgent, self-focused mire that made the 1970s the “Me Decade.” Although it is certainly easy to find signs that individualism continues to be predominant in our times, we find evidence of holism also abound—James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis has had notable staying power, ecology’s resilience theory offers ways to see holistic systems and has risen in importance in the field along with adaptive management, while systems thinking generally shows us that wholes behave differently than aggregated parts and has been increasingly prominent in popular discourse and spreading in academic disciplines. Holism may well be renewing and expanding in our time. To be sure, countervailing forces also present themselves today strongly. This should not surprise us. The tension between individualism and communitarianism, or the parts versus the wholes, has been a central feature throughout American history.⁴ We expect it to continue; we also believe that for our globe’s ecological future, a holistic perspective will be better.

A measure of the genuine interdisciplinarity of fields such as environmental philosophy and environmental history might be the creation of works that either defy clean characterization into even a subtitled discipline, or genuinely appealing and important to readers from more than one discipline, or a book aimed at the literate public as much as it is aimed at a narrowly disciplinary audience, or a book that works to address real world environmental issues. *A More Perfect Union* is certainly some of these things.

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⁴The bulk of the essays in William G. Robbins and James C. Foster, eds., *Land in the American West: Private Claims and the Common Good* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) illustrate this point, as does Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

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