

Localism? Don't Buy It

by Stan Cox

Humanity's failure so far to deal with multiple crises—planet-wide ecological degradation, domination by a transnational economic elite, the deepening misery that afflicts billions in both rich and poor nations—has prompted increasing interest in local economies, which many liberals and green-living advocates view as less intimidating arenas where much-needed change might be more readily achieved.

It's true that in the earliest days of capitalism, the human exploitation and environmental destruction that came along with pursuit of profit were largely local problems. Then, inevitably, those local economies grew and coalesced into an even more destructive global economy. But retreating into local issues means latching onto one of capitalism's symptoms—the eclipsing of local economies and governments by more powerful transnational forces—and treating it as if it's the disease itself. In his 2012 book *No Local: Why Small-Scale Alternatives Won't Change the World*, Greg Sharzer writes, "The problem with localism is not its anti-corporate politics, but that these politics don't go far enough. It sees the effects of unbridled competition but not the cause."

Good intentions meet market realities

Efforts to localize have tackled issues such as promotion of hometown businesses, alternative currencies or barter systems, community-based energy generation, greener transportation and, most prominently, local food systems. The more highly visible, and shallower, forms of localism concentrate on consumption without acknowledging that it's not in the checkout queue but in the workplace that the great chasm opens up between families who live paycheck to paycheck and the more affluent, more powerful business owners who today control the fate of communities.

Localists often urge small-business owners to pay living wages and provide full benefits, but those exhortations are rarely heeded.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that in

the United States, average full-time wages in firms with fewer than 25 employees are almost 30% lower than wages in firms with 100 or more employees and that small firms provide far more meager health insurance benefits.

It's not that local owners are exceptionally greedy or heartless. As Sharzer shows, they simply have no choice but to play by the rules of the regional, national, and global market. Even the most well-intentioned local owners know that if they don't squeeze the greatest productivity out of the smallest payroll, there are plenty of other, more efficient businesses ready to take their place.

It's local food systems that have attracted the most attention. In the United States, the number of local farmers' markets tripled between 1998 and 2013. That growth, however, has been mirrored by

growth in corporate control elsewhere in the food and agricultural industries. Even as local consumption was blossoming across the country, America's food-processing sector became even more tightly concentrated in a handful of giant corporations, while the four largest grocery chains increased their share of the retail market from a disturbing 22% in 1998 to an alarming 53% in 2010.

There are physical as well as economic limits on the potential of local food. Even if Americans planted every residential lot in the country to food crops, that would substitute for less than 2% of current US cropland (and we'd have to chop down millions of shade trees). More realistically, some metropolitan areas are now dotted with community gardens and ringed with fresh-food production, but lopsided distribution of farmland imposes tight limits. For example, the largely rural state of Nebraska has 5.3 hectares per resident of soils suitable for food production, while densely populated Connecticut's far smaller cropland endowment, amounting to less than a 15-by-15-metre plot per capita, would fall far short of what is required to feed the state's residents for a year. [1]

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Global localism?

Among localists who have pursued the question to its deeper roots, some have recognized that localizing will require profound, even revolutionary, changes in production, consumption, power relations, and resource use. Australian Ted Trainer, a leading advocate of economic de-growth, has written,

The magnitude of the over-consumption problem calls for a radical alternative to consumer-capitalist society, which I label "The Simpler Way." This would involve people organizing frugal but suffi-

cient material lifestyles within mostly local economies made up of small farms and firms, using local resources and labor to meet local needs ... Most problematic of all, it could not work without the willing acceptance of frugal and self-sufficient life-

how they would address crises in the wider world. Hess suggests that communities can do that by setting a good example, augmented by engagement in "fair trade" with the rest of the world (a deviation from the "buy local" dictum, and one that ignores the failure of fair trade efforts so far to make much of a dent in global exploitation.)

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styles, strong collectivism, and a desire to give and to nurture. [2]

Such a dramatic reversal of our currently out-of-control growth trajectory is indeed necessary. But with voluntary local initiatives as the only source of change, every step along Trainer's alternative route would raise hard questions. How will an entire community come voluntarily to accept a "frugal and self-sufficient lifestyle?" How will such personal transformations overcome the highly unequal distribution of power within the community itself? How can the community fend off the embrace of the global economy? And even if the local transformation does occur, will it have any positive effects beyond its own city or county borders?

Even the most ardent localists acknowledge that only a very limited sociopolitical reach has been achieved so far. Trainer observes, "At this stage, most of these [voluntary local movements] are only implementing reforms within consumer-capitalist society." (His view is supported by research on one such initiative, the Transition Town movement that originated in Britain and has spread worldwide.) Less radical efforts have had even more limited impact; the more business-friendly localism advocate and Vanderbilt University sociology professor David Hess admits, "The 'buy local' movement is, at least at present, mostly an alliance of small businesspeople and middle-class shoppers. It is not a poor people's movement."

If movements to date have faltered in their efforts to resolve local problems, it is hard to imagine

Trainer and his followers are more realistic about localism's limited ability to influence national or global economies or ensure ecological responsibility. They are counting on a mega-disaster—most likely, they say, in the form of oil depletion or runaway climate disruption—to deliver a mortal blow to global capitalism, at which point communities that have followed the Simpler Way "will be sufficiently well established to provide a base for reconstruction when existing systems begin to fail."

A more hopeful vision comes from Greg Sharzer and Greg Albo [3], who urge local movements to stop avoiding political struggle and trying to create idealized communities; instead, they need to "confront global institutions of capitalist power in local spaces" and to join with myriad other local struggles for "transcending capitalism on a world scale."

Needless to say, taking that course will be far more arduous than gardening and buying local. But it's our only way out, and at least it has a lot more appeal than hunkering down and waiting for global catastrophe to hit.

"The 'buy local' movement is not a poor people's movement."

Stan Cox is a crop geneticist in Kansas and author of *Any Way You Slice It: The Past, Present, and Future of Rationing*, New Press 2013.

Notes

1. Stan Cox, Does it really matter whether your food was produced locally? *AlterNet*, February 18, 2010.
2. Ted Trainer, Why a consumer society can't fix the climate, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, November 4, 2013.
3. Greg Albo, The crisis and economic alternatives, in Leo Panitch, Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber (ed.), *The Question of Strategy*, Socialist Register, 2013. Merlin Press.

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