



LOCALIST MOVEMENTS IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

Sustainability, Justice, and Urban
Development in the United States

DAVID J. HESS



Localist Movements in a Global Economy

Urban and Industrial Environments

Series editor: Robert Gottlieb, Henry R. Luce Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy, Occidental College

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David J. Hess

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There may be some overlap of content with the following previously published essays: “Enhancing Justice and Sustainability at the Local Level: Affordable Policies for Local Government” (*Local Environment*, 2007); “Localism and the Environment” (*Sociology Compass*, 2008), and “What Is a Clean Bus?” (*Sustainability: Science, Policy, and Practice*, 2007). A contractual agreement provides permission for republication of any overlapping material. I began my discussion of localism in chapter 6 of the companion volume, *Alternative Pathways in Science and Industry* (MIT Press, 2007).

Localist Movements in a Global Economy

Introduction

It is 7 o'clock on a Thursday evening, and people are headed to a meeting of the "local first" business association of Springfield. The members have come together under the banner of supporting the locally owned independent businesses in their community. They are a politically diverse group, and they try to leave their partisan politics at the door. For example, Abby works for a microfinance organization that assists Springfield's minority-owned small businesses. Ben works for a large retail food cooperative and is heavily involved in sustainable local agriculture. Cathy works for a reuse center that provides job training for at-risk youth, but she also sees her work as helping to solve the problem of solid waste. Daniel, an independent software developer who is involved in a campaign against Wal-Mart, was arrested in the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization. Edna, who runs an independent bookstore, is facing debilitating competition from the chain stores, and is coming to the meeting partly because "buy local" campaigns have become a cornerstone of independent bookstores' survival. Frank, a political conservative who runs a hardware store, has seen sales dwindle since a "big-box" store came to his neighborhood and has come to the conclusion that life was much better in the era of small, neighborhood retail shops.

The names and identities of the people involved in Springfield's "local first" organization are fictitious, but the diversity of motives for joining an "independent business association" (that is, a nonprofit organization, usually restricted to a metropolitan region, that brings together small businesses and other organizations that are locally owned and not part of a franchise, a corporate chain, or a national nonprofit organization)

is characteristic of what I have experienced in three years of involvement in localist politics in the United States. By 2008 there were about 100 independent business associations across the United States that were affiliated with either the American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA) or the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE). The annual meetings of BALLE provided one gathering point for the movement. At those meetings, owners of small businesses, officials from local governments, and representatives of nonprofit organizations could hear talks by localist leaders and attend dozens of smaller “break-out” sessions. The topics included community capital, employee ownership, fair trade, “green” buildings, inner-city entrepreneurship, local food, and renewable energy.

Advocates of independent businesses and nonprofit organizations argue that locally owned and locally controlled organizations are the backbone of the economy and provide leadership in local civil society and politics. They sometimes also claim that such organizations provide good job opportunities and that they are more responsive than large corporations to concerns about a region’s quality of life and environment. More generally, advocates of what is often called “localism” see invigorating locally owned independent businesses as the basis for building and maintaining not only a region’s economic well-being but also its environmental, political, and social well-being. In this book, I will examine those and related premises with the aim of developing a better understanding of a variety of social change efforts directed at revitalizing local ownership and local democracy.

Localism, Globalization, and Localization

The idea of localism engenders many controversies, of which perhaps the most basic is the definition of the term “localism” itself. Many researchers have recognized that the historical changes generally referred to as “globalization” have brought about a paradoxical reemergence of the local; indeed, it is widely assumed that globalization and localization are two sides of the same coin. As a result, to understand localism and localization, it is necessary to begin with a basic understanding of globalization.¹

From an economic perspective, globalization is a historical change characterized by the increasing complexity and density of global supply chains, the internationalization of finance, and the concentration of wealth in large multinational corporations and the elites who benefit from them. Far from a natural evolution driven by economic laws such as increasing returns to scale, the economic changes have been guided by national policies and international treaties that support trade liberalization, reduce welfare-state obligations, restructure markets, and facilitate industrial consolidation. The changes have generated enormous wealth, but inequalities in the distribution of wealth have increased in many countries, including the United States.

From a political perspective, globalization involves the weakening of the capacity of a nation-state to direct and organize its economy. Although small post-colonial governments have long experienced such limitations, even powerful national governments such as that of the United States have found their economic sovereignty limited by the growing web of international treaties, international governmental organizations, multinational corporations, trade relationships, and transnational civil-society organizations. Furthermore, state and city governments have developed their own relationships to the global economy that, to some degree, bypass national politics and policies. Government, at all levels, has undergone changes as functions once deemed to be the proper purview of governments have been passed on to the nonprofit and private sectors and as representative decision making by elected and appointed officials has been displaced by governance among stakeholders. As a result, “democracy deficits” have become more prominent, not only at the international level (where the global population lacks the franchise), but also at the national and local levels. Such changes have tended to block political opportunities for redress of local claims through conventional political channels. Because political opportunities can be blocked, the conditions are set for the emergence of anti-globalization and localist movements.

Along with the economic and political transformations have come tremendous social changes. Previously important forms of identity, such as working-class and national identities, have been reconfigured. The growth of the Internet and the availability of air travel to the masses

have enabled the proliferation and maintenance of identities linked to transnational and translocal communities, such as identities based on ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, hobbies, or occupational interest. Local, place-based identities have also been reconfigured as people have come to see their home towns through the lens of comparison with other places and times. They may find the environmental side effects of local industry and the visible deterioration of neighborhoods unacceptable, especially if they have seen alternative models as they are being developed throughout the world.

From an ecological perspective, globalization has increased the awareness of the limits on the carrying capacity of the planet. Attention to greenhouse-gas emissions increased after 2000, but climate change is only one part of a complex web of interlocking environmental and infrastructural crises that include persistent pollutants in the biosphere (including in human bodies); ongoing destruction of natural habitats by resource-extraction ventures and human populations; increasing demands for and shortages of water; technological and investment gaps for renewable energy; and broken, decaying, and nonexistent infrastructures in many of the world's cities and rural areas. The poor often bear the greatest burden of such changes, so environmental and social justice problems are also deeply intertwined. Global in scope and local in effect, the changing relationship between humans and the environment, and our understanding of that relationship, are also elements of what "globalization" has come to mean.

One way of thinking about "the local" in an era of globalization is to view it as a disappearing phenomenon as the world becomes more transnational, cosmopolitan, de-territorialized, and culturally homogeneous. However, most theorists of globalization have dismissed that perspective as simplistic. Rather than the mere absorption of the local into the global, they say, we are witnessing a remaking of the relationship between the local and the global. The term "glocal," which has been used to refer to the production of standardized goods in global commodity chains that simultaneously reproduce and alter local cultures through product differentiation, represents one attempt to capture the complexities of new local-global relationships. Likewise, the concept of "global cities" draws attention to the emergence of specialized, place-based nodes in a global-

ized economy. In a world characterized by rapidly changing local-global relationships, there are various forms of localization that accompany changes associated with globalization. I find it useful to distinguish localism as a movement from four other forms of localization: the technopole or regional industrial cluster, Internet-based hyperlocalism, environmentally oriented relocalization, and political devolution.²

With respect to the first type of localization, the growth of global political institutions, multinational corporations, transnational non-governmental organizations, and regional trading blocks has coincided with a growing awareness of the importance of subnational regions and their direct connections to global systems. Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells, Peter Hall, and other social scientists have explored the growth of “global cities” and “technopoles,” where high-tech industrial clusters achieve a better position in the global economy as a result of place-based synergies that occur with the co-location of businesses. When a business locates in a region that has other businesses in the same industry, it is possible to take advantage of informal innovation networks, a talented labor force, industry-appropriate financial and legal services, and networks of linkages with regional governments and universities. All around the world, national and regional governments struggle to build metropolitan industrial clusters with the hope of becoming the next Silicon Valley. The advantages of co-location are now well known and carefully cultivated. The cluster model of economic development seeks to strengthen the complex networks of relationships of the high-tech firms of a regional economy in order to foster a dynamic network of innovative businesses in a particular industry.³

The model of the urban industrial cluster is not the only example of localization that has emerged in an era of globalization. In the media, retail, and information-technology industries there is also increasing discussion of “hyperlocalism”—that is, the use of localized knowledge and local social networks as a new source of corporate profits. One form of hyperlocalism takes local knowledge, such as knowledge about restaurant service and food quality, and converts it into reviews and commentaries that provide guidance to potential consumers. Informal, word-of-mouth, local knowledge is converted into nonlocal, Internet-based discussions; in turn, the readers’ attention can be sold to local and

nonlocal advertisers. Another form of hyperlocalism involves retail chains' use of the computerization of inventories to develop localized databases that customers can search. Although the first phase of online superstores did not entail inventories for local branches of a chain, the next wave of databases increasingly enabled customers to find out quickly which products are available at a local branch. What was once informal and local knowledge, or at least an action that involved a phone call and a conversation with a sales representative about which store actually has what items in stock, has become codified, Internet-based knowledge that is used to attract local consumers in order to enhance the profits of corporate retailers. Increasingly, retail chains are taking the next step in hyperlocal marketing by tailoring merchandise to local neighborhoods. A third example of hyperlocalism involves large media companies. Urban newspapers, in the wake of circulation declines (attributable to the migration of readers to the Internet), have turned to supporting local social networks and online communities of local interest groups. By becoming more deeply integrated into the local society, urban newspapers are able to develop novel content that complements the readily available national and international content of the nonlocal media. The local content and social networks drive website visits and create the potential for new streams of advertising revenue. The three examples of hyperlocalism all utilize local knowledge and Internet-mediated connections with place-based communities as ways of generating new revenue, which in turn is converted into profits, usually for nonlocal shareholders.⁴

A third form of localization is directly related to environmental movements. The "back to the land" movement of the 1970s had the goal of returning to a simpler, agrarian lifestyle in order to live in greater harmony with nature and to experiment with appropriate technologies such as organic agriculture and renewable energy. Ecovillages and other experimental living arrangements also involved local communities that aimed to achieve some degree of self-sufficiency through more communal lifestyles. In the early 2000s, the Post-Carbon Institute launched the Relocalization Network, which helped more than 150 chapters around the world to develop plans and projects for life in an "energy-constrained future." Considerably more pragmatic and less utopian than some of its

historical predecessors, the Relocalization Network represents another iteration of environmentalism and localization. Here the focus is less on building new types of community than on shifting existing cities and towns toward local self-reliance in food and energy. Although similar to localism, the Relocalization Network is much more driven by environmental concerns and less concerned with local ownership. As a result, for the purposes of this book it is classified as an example of localization but not of localism.⁵

A fourth example of localization involves the changing relationship among levels of governments. In the United States since 1980, there has been a general trend toward the devolution of responsibilities from the federal government to state and local governments. Although federal funding has sometimes followed devolution, in many cases the funding has not been adequate for the new responsibilities of state and local governments, and consequently the changes have in some cases created gaps in service delivery. Furthermore, devolution has often been accompanied by privatization, or the shifting of the implementation of programs from the public sector to the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, often via public-private partnerships. As the anthropologist Dorothy Holland and her colleagues have shown, the “outsourcing of government” has created opportunities for local governments and civil-society organizations, but it has also created new patterns of exclusion. Furthermore, the devolution and privatization of government have tended to shift both local governments and civil-society organizations from a role of advocacy to one of service delivery. In the United Kingdom, similar policy changes associated with the Labour Party were called “the New Localism”; to avoid confusion, I will call this type of localization “devolution.”⁶

I will use the term “localism” to refer to a fifth pattern of renewed emphasis on the local in a globalized world. “Localism” is understood here as the movement in support of government policies and economic practices oriented toward enhancing local democracy and local ownership of the economy in a historical context of corporate-led globalization. Although cluster-based synergies emerge in networks of locally owned independent businesses, they differ from the export-oriented, high-tech clusters that economic development offices favor in their quest

for the next technopole. The high-tech clusters may involve some local ownership, but in general the financing of such enterprises involves venture capital. The goal of a high-tech start-up is an initial public offering of stock or sale to a large company, either of which leads to geographically dispersed ownership. Likewise, the Internet can be used to network associations of locally owned and independent businesses, and even to network independent business associations across countries, but the goal of localism is not to channel local knowledge and consumption into the profits of multinational corporations, which is the general logic behind hyperlocalism. Regarding the third type of localization, localism has an environmentally oriented strand, but it is not fundamentally concerned with environmental issues in the way that the Relocalization Network is. There are environmental dividends associated with localist politics, but localist politics focus on local democracy and economic sovereignty. Finally, although in some cases the localist goals of small-business development mesh with those of microenterprise development and other market-oriented anti-poverty initiatives, localism focuses less on the politics of devolution and privatization and more on restoring economic and political democracy to communities that have increasingly found their worlds dominated by multinational capital.

Localism as a Movement

Is it appropriate to think of localism as a movement? There are some good reasons why the concept of a movement may be helpful in understanding localism, as opposed to thinking of it as merely a new strategy for owners of small businesses to act as an interest group. Although a diverse group of citizens and small-business owners may come together in a “local first” meeting under the shared banner of supporting locally owned independent businesses and family farms, they do not come together only under that banner. They also meet because they are concerned with global problems (addiction to oil, ongoing warfare, decay of old neighborhoods, rising crime and poverty), and with a general sense of degradation of the economy, of politics, of neighborhoods, and of the quality of life in a place they call home. In other words, there is a second, political and social dimension to localism that in many ways encom-

passes the narrow economic calculus of local businesses that are banding together to resist the negative side effects of corporate consolidation. There is a sense of civic purpose, of not spending an evening bowling alone but instead spending time building something together with other people who share a similar concern for their community. The sense of opposition to the dominant direction of the world politics and economics is one reason why one might think of localism as a movement.⁷

Another reason for thinking of localism as a movement is that the word “movement” appears in the language of localist organizations. At localist conferences and meetings, I have often heard people refer to their activities as a movement. A more objective indication of the self-identification of localism as a movement is that at the time of writing there were more than 30,000 webpages that used the phrase “buy local movement.” In the minds of many people who support the basic principle of restoring local and independent ownership to the economy, localism is a movement.

Arguably, localism is also a movement in the more technical social-scientific sense, because it involves a social-change agenda based on a long-term, multi-organizational challenge to powerful social institutions, specifically an economy and a polity dominated by large multinational corporations. However, very little of the action of localist organizations involves street protests and other extra-institutional actions. We social scientists often use the criterion of extra-institutional action as an essential feature in our definitions of social movements. In cases where the repertoires of action occur mostly within existing institutions but there is still a multi-organizational, multi-campaign effort with a social-change agenda that challenges elite authority, I prefer to use the term “reform movement” instead of “social movement.” Furthermore, because much localist action takes place through the marketplace rather than in civil society or in the political arena, it might be better to think of localism in more general terms as an “alternative pathway” for social change in the global economy. Although I will use the term “localist movement” occasionally in this book, the term “alternative pathway” helps to free the imagination to recognize other types of reform action that are characteristic of localism, such as use of the market and consumption as vehicles of social change.⁸

As with most broad movements, the category of localism embraces a variety of inter-related movements, activist networks, and advocacy groups. The most common expressions of localism as a movement occur in “buy local” campaigns and in other forms of political action that are driven primarily by locally owned independent retail businesses and by locally oriented agrifood networks (a category that I will define to include community gardening). I will explore aspects of those dimensions of localism in chapters 4 and 5, but I have also tried to open up thinking about localism by exploring what localism can and does mean in other industries where efforts to enhance or preserve local ownership occur. Examples include advocacy in favor of community choice and local public ownership of electricity production, better and greener public transportation systems, and community-oriented and community-controlled media. Although each of the topics is vast, I have been guided by a general interest in exploring the extent to which localism is in a tradeoff relationship or a synergetic relationship with goals of social and environmental responsibility. As a result, rather than attempt a comprehensive coverage of all forms of localism, I have focused this investigation of localism on examples that make it possible to analyze the degree to which localist politics are consistent with or in tension with goals of sustainability and justice.

By interpreting localism as a movement, I will also argue that its political goals are broadly consistent with those of the anti-corporate, anti-globalization movement. As I will show, there is evidence to support the argument in the writings of localist leaders and in some of the practices of localist organizations. I do not deny that there are also significant differences between the localist and anti-globalization movements. Localism does not involve dramatic street protests against global financial organizations, as the anti-globalization movement does. With a largely middle-class social composition (in the sense of a primary class location in the small-business sector and the local nonprofit sector), localism may involve alliances with teamsters, students, and “turtles,” but it is not a labor-youth-environmental movement. Although it is important to recognize the differences with the anti-globalization movement, one should also recognize the points of convergence. Support of independent local ownership is defined in opposition to the increasing control of local

economies everywhere by large publicly traded corporations. Localist leaders also criticize the huge government subsidies, tax breaks, and incentives that go to large corporations, while small businesses are left to fend for themselves. In short, the loss of democracy to corporatocracy is a common theme for the localist and anti-globalization movements.⁹

Types and Ranges of Localism

The geographical scope of “local” is another controversial topic that warrants some initial discussion. At the upper end of the scale, the term can be used as an equivalent for “domestic” or “national” in the context of global trade. It can also refer to a country within the European Union, or to a North American state or province. For example, many American states support labels, such as “made in Vermont,” that draw attention to the state-level provenance of products. At a smaller scale, “local” has sometimes been used to refer to a neighborhood or a small city within a metropolitan region. In this book, “local” will designate a geographic scale that is generally larger than a small city or a neighborhood and smaller than most American states. To be specific, “local” will refer to the scale outlined by the economic-development researchers Edward Blakely and Ted Bradshaw:

Regional and local are used interchangeably to refer to a geographical area composed of a group of local government authorities that generally share a common economic base and are close enough together to allow residents to commute between them for employment, recreation, or retail shopping. (2002: xvi)

Although “local” in this sense could be used to refer to a rural geographical area, my focus in this book will be on metropolitan or urban regions. I choose this level and this urban focus because in the United States it is in such regions that localism as a movement has taken off.

Another definitional problem involves the economic dimension of localism. In its most “pure” or ideal form, localism involves a confluence of four features: locally sourced resources or inputs into food and manufactured goods, production of goods by locally owned businesses, sales through locally owned organizations, and consumption by a population that shares a geographical locale with the producers and retailers. An

organization that exemplifies all four features is a farm that utilizes mostly local inputs (by saving seeds and by using waste from one animal or plant as food for another), is owned locally, sells to consumers in a nearby city (either directly or through locally owned organizations such as food cooperatives), and restricts most of its sales to local customers. Another example is a credit union that serves a geographically restricted region and invests primarily in loans to members and to locally owned independent businesses. A third example is a community radio station that is funded by local donations and serves a local listening area with locally developed programming that focuses on local news and features. These three examples might be thought of as representing “pure” localism, but it is obvious that even in such cases not everything is local; the farm’s tools and machines, the credit union’s computers and software, and the radio station’s broadcasting equipment are all likely to have come from other regions of the country or the world.¹⁰

A more common, hybrid form of localism is found among owners of small service businesses and Main Street retailers who have banded together under the threat of competition from chains and franchises. Because most of their wares are purchased from nonlocal producers and made with nonlocal inputs, the localist component involves only two of the four aspects of localism: local ownership and sales to local markets. Another example of a hybrid type of localism is a local government agency that provides goods and services to a region, such as a publicly owned utility or a public transit system. The products used, such as buses and fuel (diesel or natural gas), are generally not manufactured or extracted in the region, but the other two aspects of localism—ownership and sale to local customers—are present. Today, much of what passes as localism more closely approximates the hybrid type of small retailers and public agencies than the pure type. However, the pure type is useful to keep in mind as a yardstick against which other types of localism might be measured.

It is also necessary to have in mind a third concept in addition to the pure and hybrid forms of localism: some locally owned independent businesses that cater mostly to the local economy purchase some supplies and services from other locally owned businesses outside the region. Here, there is a direct relationship between independent producers in one

region and independent retailers in another region, and we need a third category to describe such local-to-local supply chains. I use the terms “global localism” and “alternative global economy” to describe the interesting transnational networks of alternative commodity chains that operate outside the mainstream global economy of large food, manufacturing, and retail corporations.¹¹

Although there is tremendous variation in the geographical scope and the organizational forms associated with localism, there are important boundaries that figure in localist politics. For example, the line between a locally owned independent business and a publicly traded global business is by no means easy to draw. For some publicly traded corporations, a group of stockholders may control a significant portion of the company and live in the region where the company is headquartered. This type of organization is in some sense locally owned, but it is not “independent” in the sense of being closely held by a few owners who live in the region where they work. The distinction becomes important because publicly traded corporations, or start-up companies that have significant equity from “angel” investors or from venture-capital firms, tend to be vulnerable to acquisition by larger corporations. The story of the ice cream producer Ben and Jerry’s—once locally owned and independent—is well known in the localist movement. In an effort to maintain its mission of social responsibility, the company’s initial public offering was limited to residents of Vermont, but gradually the shareholders sold their stocks to nonlocal buyers. Eventually Ben and Jerry’s became a target for acquisition and was purchased by Unilever, a huge international firm that produces a wide variety of domestic household and food brands. Although the parent company maintained Ben and Jerry’s “peace politics” as part of its strategy of occupying a niche market position with a well-known brand, the original owners lost control of the company, and about 20 percent of the workforce was laid off. Once a locally owned independent business with roots in a region and obligations to the local workforce and communities, Ben and Jerry’s became a local brand in a global business.¹²

Another distinction is that between localism in the modern, globalized economy and locally oriented production and distribution in the pre-modern, subsistence economy. The first human societies had locally

based economies (generally with limited inter-societal trading), and even in the great empires much agricultural production was for local subsistence. In the United States, the frontier communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries engaged in locally oriented subsistence farming, and even the export-oriented cotton and tobacco plantations were supported by an infrastructure of locally produced food, clothing, and other goods. With the development of transportation and communication infrastructures during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (canals, railroads, steamships, telephones, highways, airplanes, the Internet), the localized subsistence economy increasingly gave way to a continental and then a global economy. However, the ideal of a return to the subsistence lifestyle reemerged in other localization movements, such as the “back to the land” movement, and there are some points of overlap between participants in those movements and participants in the localist movement. Although such points of overlap exist, in twenty-first century America localism is primarily an urban movement. The primary social address of localism is not the hippie farmer who wants to return to a simpler way of life but the local retailer, credit union, restaurant, city government department, radio station, or nonprofit organization.

Localism, Sustainability, and Justice

In this book I will provide an overview of localism in the United States and a perspective on some of the scholarly debates that have emerged. In doing so, I will focus on the question of the extent to which localism can contribute solutions to the world’s environmental and social problems. The first of my two central arguments will be that any understanding of localism in the United States, not to mention in other countries, should take into account considerable variation, and not only across geographical locales but also across industries. As a result, one should be cautious about generalizations based on a narrow slice of localist politics and reform efforts. Second, the redevelopment of locally owned independent businesses can contribute to solving environmental and equality problems, but such contributions are uneven, and I am skeptical that localism alone can provide complete solutions. As the agrifood scholars E. Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman have suggested, it

would be a recipe for ineffectiveness to focus only on the local level of politics and to ignore the need to address policy problems at the state, federal, and global levels. DuPuis and Goodman advocate “reflexive politics of localism”—that is, an approach that would make localism “an effective social movement of resistance against globalism” (2005: 364). In this book, I develop their suggestion. I explore both the potentials and the challenges of localism across a variety of industries, and I suggest ways in which such reflexive politics have already emerged and can be developed further. There are already examples of localism that show concern with environmental and social justice goals and that are connected with reform efforts at multiple scales. Those examples suggest the potential to develop a global localism that is anchored in the project of building an alternative global economy that potentially could be more effective in addressing global problems of sustainability and justice than a global economy dominated by large multinational corporations.¹³

As a background for understanding my argument, I should clarify what I mean by “sustainability” and “justice.” I use a definition of “sustainability” that is more or less in line with that of the ecological economist Herman Daly, who drew attention to the ultimate question of global ecosystem collapse. In my rendition of his definition, human life is sustainable if our use of global ecosystem resources is less than the ability of the ecosystem to replenish consumed resources (or to supply substitutions), and if environmental “sinks” (pollution and waste) do not exceed the capacity of the global ecosystem to process them. To address sustainability, we should think about the fundamental question of the carrying capacity of the planet and the growth logic of human societies. Because the growth logic of human societies is driven in part by a financial system that rewards short-term growth in revenue and profitability, the long-run solution to the underlying problem of sustainability will require developing alternative ways of organizing the global economy. The localist model of privately held companies with a mission of community stewardship and an ability to choose environmental and social values over growth provides one pathway for restructuring the global economy in an era of environmental limits.¹⁴

The ecologically oriented definition of sustainability does not draw attention to issues of justice. As most students of environmental issues

recognize, environmental burdens are not borne equally across the world. The poor, especially those who live in coastal regions or in areas subject to droughts in the less developed countries, are most likely to undergo hardship in response to climate change. Among the poor it is often women, children, and the elderly who shoulder the heaviest burdens of poverty. The poor also tend to suffer more from environmental pollution, such as the hazards of chemical plants and the effects of mineral-extraction projects. Furthermore, when people are so poor and so resource constrained that they must choose between resource conservation and staying alive, they are not able to integrate sustainability considerations into their livelihoods. As a result, the problem of sustainability is closely linked to the problem of justice. By “justice” I mean mainly the effects of a globalized economy on wage and income inequality and on the quality of life in diverse regions of the world. This focus does not imply that other perspectives on justice are unimportant, but my focus will be on distributive or social justice, understood here to involve how society’s goods and bads are distributed across class, geographical, ethnic, gender, and other social divisions. However, I will also make reference to the concept of procedural justice, using that term loosely to refer to issues of fairness in democratic process and transparency in decision making across the political system.

Matters of sustainability and justice can be understood as social problems, but sustainability and justice are also social values in the sense that they refer to general notions about the way the world should, ideally, be organized. When referring to the way values are instantiated in organizations, I will use the term “goals,” and often I will use “social and environmental responsibility goals” as a substitute for “sustainability and justice.” Often such goals are considerably narrower than the concepts of sustainability and justice as defined here, but I will view them as aligned with the overarching values of achieving a more sustainable and just world. There is a range of benefits that localism could, in theory, provide for the project of building a more just and sustainable world, and we might think of them in terms of environmental and social benefits or dividends. However, the relationships among localism, sustainability, and justice are not always as straightforward as might first appear.

Method and Organization

In the pages that follow, I seek to understand, explicate, and occasionally criticize the arguments, strategies, and projects of those who gather under the banner of localism today. It should be clear at the outset that I am optimistic about the possibilities of localism, but I also see it as a complex social phenomenon that has some strands that are more able than others to contribute solutions to global problems of sustainability and justice. In order to understand localism, I have become immersed in localist politics, not only by attending localist events as a dispassionate observer but also by becoming actively involved in the long and hard work of building an independent business association in the area where I live. I have accepted that challenge partly because, after decades of studying knowledge and social movements, I have increasingly wanted to bridge the gap between the academy and activism, and I am drawn to the prospect of building an alternative global economy that one strand of localism offers. I have chosen not to write about my personal experience in upstate New York because I considered it community service rather than fieldwork, and ethically it is best to treat such work as providing background insight, which for me has been considerable. I prefer instead to use formal, semi-structured interviews as a source of data, as I have done in some of the chapters below. As a result, this book draws on a variety of sources of empirical evidence gathered between 2005 and 2008: books, articles, and other documents written by localist advocates, critics, and scholars; interviews; visits to about thirty locally owned independent organizations that were selected for their potential to address problems of sustainability and of justice in a variety of industries; attendance at annual conferences of BALLE and regional conferences where localist themes were prominent; and participation in localist networks and in an independent business association.

Independent business associations have been growing rapidly across North America, and similar efforts can be found in other parts of the world, especially Europe. Although a comparative perspective on localism would be helpful, it is beyond the scope of the present book, which is limited to localism in the United States. To some extent the narrowing of focus is based on the empirical research that I have completed to date,

and to some extent the focus on the United States can be justified as important because it examines how the world's cradle of neoliberal globalization has also produced a counter-movement that challenges the assumptions of the "Washington consensus."¹⁵

To date there has been very little social-scientific reflection on localism, and consequently there is a need for a book that steps back and probes the conditions, challenges, and potential of the movement. Here I adopt an interdisciplinary strategy that combines theoretical reflection, empirical research, and policy analysis. In the first three chapters, I draw on a wide range of theories about sustainability, the global corporate economy, and economic development. In the next four chapters, which constitute the empirical portion of the book, I develop an analysis of localism based on organizational case studies and other empirical evidence. In the final chapters, I assess both the challenges to and the potentials of localism, and I examine a variety of proposals that might enhance the prospect of developing an alternative global economy.

In chapter 1, I explore localism as a political ideology or philosophy. Specifically, I examine the mainstream debate between neoliberal and liberal approaches to the global problems of environmental sustainability and social justice. I then consider radical alternatives in the socialist and communalist tradition. Localism has points in common with all four political positions but cannot be reduced to one or the other. Furthermore, localism draws attention less to the relationship between the government and the economy, which is the basis of debate between and within radical and mainstream political positions, than to the question of the relationship between the large publicly traded corporation and society as a whole. Likewise, localism also draws more attention to the problem of the rights of place-based communities to self-determination than to economic justice in the distributive sense of the reduction of poverty and protection of the working class. In common with some of the critics of mainstream politics, localism suggests that an economy based on the large publicly traded corporation may be maladapted to solving today's social and environmental problems. However, the alternatives developed by advocates of increased local ownership are different from those articulated by socialists and communalists.

In chapter 2, I consider localism as a system of knowledge and as a critique of the research field of economic development studies. Specifically, the history of export-oriented economic development strategies in American cities has generated increasing awareness of the limitations of the strategies, and the growth of import substitution provides a complementary economic development strategy. In this chapter I examine the legacy of import substitution as a strategy for economic development in less developed countries, the reasons for the shift to export-oriented policies, and the reasons why trade liberalization policies have provoked increasing skepticism in both the more and less wealthy countries. In addition, I examine the arguments that have been raised against localism as a regional development strategy, and I review “localist research,” an emerging field that evaluates the economic and social impact of local ownership.

In chapter 3, I develop a theoretical reflection on localism by examining arguments that have been raised against the localist vision of an alternative global economy that could bring about a more just and sustainable world order. Criticisms that localism is neither more just nor more sustainable than an economy based on corporate globalization are useful because they help sharpen our understanding of both the challenges and the potential of localism. I suggest that the criticisms cannot be the basis of a facile rejection of localism. Instead, one must examine localism as a highly variable reform movement, some elements of which address issues of sustainability and of justice better than others. The argument becomes the basis for the explorations in the next four chapters, in which I consider localism in five industries: retail, food, energy, transportation, and the media.

In chapter 4, I examine the type of localism that is organized as a movement in support of locally owned businesses. I compare the history of the anti-chain-store movement of the 1920s and the 1930s with the growth of grassroots “buy local” campaigns since 1995. I note a possible tension within the “buy local” form of localism between defense of locally owned independent businesses and broader goals of social and environmental responsibility. I also trace out the implications of the tension in both an analysis of organizational mission statements of

independent business associations and a more detailed inquiry into cases of selected issues that have emerged in some of the associations. Further, I analyze some of the patterns found in my case studies of reuse centers as one example of a form of retail localism where sustainability goals and justice goals can be found together.

In chapter 5, I review the background literature in agrifood studies, which is generally critical of the reformist aspirations of localism. Because agrifood scholars have produced the most developed academic literature on localism, they provide some valuable insights into the challenges of sustainability and justice that localism as a pathway for change faces. The literature focuses on local agricultural networks that connect urban and suburban consumers with regional farms via food cooperatives, farmers' markets, locally oriented restaurants, and community-supported agriculture. Agrifood scholars note a disjuncture that can occur between local ownership and sustainable agricultural practices, a lack of concern with farmworkers' rights, and some general convergences between this form of localism and neoliberalism. Again, I argue that one should be careful about generalizing from one form of localism to the movement as a whole or even to the food industry as a whole. I analyze case-study material on urban community gardening and urban nonprofit farms to show that government-oriented protest politics of variable scale and substantial concern with issues of sustainability and justice can be found in this field of localist politics.

In chapter 6, I examine localism in the context of municipal, regional, or state government ownership. I study three cases of local ownership in the electric power industry: public power, community choice, and conservation utilities. In each case I examine the potential and challenges with respect to producing higher levels of energy conservation and/or renewable energy, the effects of the organizations on low-income energy access and savings, and the potential for renewable energy and energy conservation to be configured as an import-substitution approach to economic development. In the second section of the chapter, I examine the greening of public transportation as a complex network of relationships among transit technology innovations, government regulations, environmental justice groups, and the economics and practices of fleet management. I examine the environmental and social dimensions of the

definitional conflicts regarding urban transit and the potential for the greening of public transportation to be linked to the generation of local businesses and economic development based on import substitution.

In chapter 7, I explore the history of media-reform movements in the United States and the emergence of alternative and community media as one strategy for opposing corporate control of the media. At both the national and the local level, independent media that support the goals of local ownership and social and environmental responsibility have faced severe financial struggles. I examine the problem of consolidation of for-profit alternative media, appropriation by and opposition from National Public Radio, and the potentials and pitfalls of nonprofit ownership as a strategy of survival. A historical analysis of print and broadcast media grounds the next section, in which I examine claims about the grassroots and democratic potential of Internet-based media. With that background in mind, I go on to examine the emergence of negative coverage of localism in the American media and investigate the hypothesis that negative coverage of localism is beginning to emerge more from large media corporations.

In chapter 8, I cover various proposals for policy change that would strengthen opportunities for creating stronger locally oriented economies. I examine new financial products and new ways of thinking about investment that would open up capital flows into locally owned independent businesses and nonprofit organizations. I then examine policy changes needed at the local and national levels of government, and suggest how reforms in support of localism could be connected with other reform efforts oriented toward the social and environmental responsibility of multinational corporations. The policy issues outlined in this chapter form the basis for my assessment of localism in the concluding chapter.

In this book I map out some of the underlying ideas and assumptions of the localist movement in the United States and some of the differences across industries. I weigh the environmental and social challenges of localism and ponder their potential consistency with, or conflicts with, parallel projects for economic reform. As an alternative pathway in urban development, localism raises fundamental questions about economic development strategies that are based on attracting large

corporate manufacturers, big-box stores, and high-tech start-up companies. On that ground alone it provides a valuable way of rethinking issues related to the economic development, inequality, and urban and industrial environments. Localism is by no means a panacea for the problem of rechanneling economic development in more sustainable and just directions, but some forms of localism can serve as ingredients in projects to build more democratic, just, and sustainable politics for the twenty-first century, or at least for mitigating what some believe to be an inevitable future of environmental and social collapse. Understanding the potential of localism to contribute to social and environmental responsibility goals requires a perspective on the movement that explores its variations, its challenges, and its limitations. Much of that potential rests on building connections with other reform movements that seek to build an alternative global economy.

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