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Abstract

Localism, understood here as a movement to regain sovereignty over the local economy in an era of globalization, offers an alternative economic development strategy to that of the high-tech, export-oriented manufacturing cluster. Instead, localism advocates call attention to the benefits of import-replacing strategies that strengthen locally owned businesses, farms, and nonprofit organizations, as well as local government agencies. Primary examples of localism include the 'buy local movement' supported by independent retailers and banks, community-controlled energy, and local food and agricultural networks. Localism may generate environmental benefits due to decreased transportation and increased awareness of the environmental effects of production when located near consumers, but the connection between localism and environmental dividends is variable and tenuous.

The term 'localism' can be used in many ways, among them policies that devolve national-level government functions to local governments (Stoker 2004), regional industrial clusters that draw on place-based synergies with universities and local governments (Castells and Hall 1994), localization strategies employed by Internet firms to carve out new markets (Covert 2006), and the legal doctrine that broadcasters should serve the interests of the communities in which they are located (Hilliard and Keith 2005). This article focuses on another use of a term: the social movement that aims to increase the role of locally owned, independent businesses and other organizations that primarily serve the geographical communities in which they are located. To some degree the strengthening of the locally owned, independent sector of regional economies has environmental benefits. Examples include sustainable, local agriculture; locally owned stores and services offer toward green products; and locally owned distributed energy involves renewable sources. However, because localism is primarily about local ownership, and local ownership and production are not always greener than their global alternatives, the environmental aspects of localism appear as only one strand in a movement, and environmental concerns may be more or less prominent depending on organizations, regions, and industries. As a result, when assessing the localism–environment connection, it is important to take in account the variation in localism as a starting point.

Background

The geographical scope of the meaning of the word 'local' varies widely from one place to another. In contexts of international trade, the term 'local' may be used as the equivalent of 'domestic' or 'national', and in some cases, 'local' may refer to an entity the size of an American state or European country. The term will be used here in its more common meaning of a metropolitan region or rural region in which the inhabitants share common shopping, employment, and other economic relationships. The widespread variation, even in some cases contestations, of what is meant by the word 'local' should serve as a reminder that shared definitions are products of complex histories that involve the interaction of actors and institutions on various scales (Goodman 2004; Hinrichs 2003).

Although there is an interest in enhancing local ownership in many countries, this essay will focus mostly on the USA, where there is an organized movement around local, independent business associations and local agricultural networks. Although advocates of localism refer to their activities as a 'movement', localism in the USA is also a social movement in the sociological sense because it has extensive organizational and temporal scope, articulates a social change goal that challenges elite views about the best ways to organize the economy, and in some cases uses extrainstitutional repertoires of action. Localist groups can exhibit elements of an 'industrial opposition movement', such as the antinuclear and antigenetically modified foods movements, when they become involved in campaigns against big-box (superstore) retail development, and in such cases extrainstitutional repertoires of action, such as street protest, are visible. However, through the support of alternative, locally made and fair trade products and labels, localist groups also exhibit elements of 'technology- and product-oriented movement', such as the pro-alternative renewable energy and organic foods movements, where repertoires of action tend to occur inside existing institutions (Hess 2007). Examples of reformist repertoires of action include city ordinances intended to favor local businesses and limit superstores; 'buy local' campaigns, which urge consumers and local organizations to increase their purchases from locally owned, independent stores, farms, banks, and other organizations; and the development of community-oriented financial institutions.

The emergence of localism as a social movement is deeply implicated in the politics of globalization. Theorists of globalization have recognized that the local and global are mutually constitutive and that there are various ways in which the local and global interact each other (Robertson 2005; Sassen 2000). The localist movement is concerned primarily with reversing the negative effects of corporate consolidation of the economy, especially the loss of economic sovereignty by place-based communities over local economies. Because of the fundamental concern with the negative effects of corporate control over local economies, localism can be seen as part of, or at least parallel with, the broader antiglobalization, anticorporate movement. A distinguishing characteristic of the localist movement is that its social address is primarily in the small business sector, and localism advocates tend to utilize consumption and local economic policies as the primary avenues for social change.

The localist movement of the early 2000s in the USA has a historical precedent in the anti-chain-store movement of the 1930s. Although the earlier movement ended in failure, it produced significant legislative victories that responded to widespread public concern with consolidation of the retail sector. A sociological analysis of the legislative responses indicated that success depended on intrastate activity and interstate diffusion of the legislation, whereas the collapse of the movement was due largely to industrial action in the federal courts (Ingram and Rao 2004). Industry also enrolled labor unions and agricultural cooperatives for support, and it framed consumption as a narrow economic activity that was based on pricing (Ingram and Rao 2004; Mitchell 2006). The localist movement of the early 2000s is different from its predecessor in that it has not utilized state legislatures as a primary arena for action; rather, the legislative emphasis has been on local ordinances that restrict the potential of big-box stores to locate in a community (Talbot and Dolby 2003). Furthermore, localism today also utilizes direct-to-consumer 'buy local' campaigns. In addition to developing directories and media campaigns, 'buy local' campaigns have used local labels with some success (Brand 2005) as well as electronic databases (Gengatharen and Standing 2004; Persky et al. 1993; Sandro 1994).

Localism advocates are often critical of regional economic development strategies that offer government subsidies and tax breaks in order to attract distant manufacturers and corporate retail firms. There is concern that the nonlocal corporations will bring pollution and congestion to the region, and that they will close or leave when subsidies run out or profits erode. Localism advocates favor a complementary strategy of import substitution or import replacement. In contrast to the export orientation of the manufacturing and the high-tech sector, import substitution emphasizes opportunities for new, locally owned businesses that can replace goods and services that the regional

economy is importing from nonlocal sources, especially in the retail, energy, and food sectors (Jacobs 1969, 1984; Persky et al. 1993; Shuman 1998, 2006; Williamson et al. 2002). To bolster the argument, localism advocates note that big-box stores rely on a perception that prices are lower, whereas studies indicate that the prices are not always lower, and superstores may start with predatory, low prices but gradually raise them once the local competition is put out of business (Mitchell 2006; Shuman 2006). Where prices are lower, the quality of goods and associated product servicing is often lower, too. Likewise, localism advocates point to studies of a 'local multiplier effect', which document that when similar expenditures are made at a locally owned business and a competing nonlocal branch of a large corporation, more money from the local store recirculates within the community and more donations are made to local nonprofit organizations (Shuman 2006).

Within the broader field of development economics, import substitution is widely viewed as a flawed economic development strategy for less developed countries. Very popular from the 1940s to the 1970s, import substitution policies gradually gave way to export-oriented, free trade policies during the 1980s and 1990s. The success of export-oriented strategies in South Korea, Taiwan, and a few other countries during the 1960s and 1970s legitimated the transition, and the structural adjustment policies of global financial institutions imposed the transition on countries that remained unconvinced (Bruton 1998). However, neoliberal trade policies and the export-oriented economic development strategy have not been successful in all developing countries, and in many regions, the neoliberal policies are associated with increased inequality and informalization of the economy (Portes and Roberts 2005). Although the international experience is not directly applicable to metropolitan economic development strategies in wealthy countries, a growing number of articles in the popular press raise criticisms very similar to those leveled at import substitution policies in less developed countries. For example, critics of localism suggest that 'buy local' campaigns are based on the flawed economics of protectionism and create nontariff barriers to trade (Hess forthcoming). Localism advocates have responded by noting that local purchasing preferences (such as can be enacted through formal zoning ordinances and purchasing guidelines or through informal consumer boycott campaigns) help level a playing field that is heavily tilted against small, independent businesses (Mitchell 2006; Shuman 2006).

Localism advocates also point out that there are many other, noneconomic benefits of having a vibrant, locally owned, independent business sector. One argument centers on the value of locally controlled enterprises for civic life and democracy. In the USA, the importance of localism for democracy was recognized for the media via the legal principle of broadcast localism, which required that broadcast media serve their local communities and meet guidelines regarding location, accessibility, and programming. Changes in federal regulations, the shift away from broadcast media, and media consolidation have weakened both the principle and practice of media localism (Hilliard and Keith 2005; Napoli 2001). However, there is also a growing community media movement, and there have been limited but favorable developments in areas such as community radio and Internet-based, local, independent news and information (Brand 2004; Dunaway 2002; Nieckarz 2002). Increasingly, media activists are showing concern with the problem of the concentration of ownership, and consequently their concerns are beginning to converge with those of the localist movement that has emerged from the small business sector.

Although the relationship between locally controlled media and local democracy may be intuitive, social science research also supports the less obvious thesis that local business ownership is associated with healthier local democracies. For example, local retail businesses are positively correlated with public gathering places, social capital, voter turnout, and average income, whereas they are negatively correlated with poverty, infant mortality, and crime (Tolbert 2005; Tolbert et al. 2002). Conversely, the construction of new Wal-Mart stores has been associated with lower social capital, voter turnout, and nonprofit organizations at a county level (Goetz and Rapasingha 2006; Goetz and

Swaminathan 2006) as well as with the predictably negative effects on existing local retail grocery stores (Artz and Stone 2006).

Localism and the environment

A central debate in the environmental sociology literature concerns the ability of the large, publicly traded corporation to address long-term issues of environmental degradation. Sociologists influenced by Marx's political economy are pessimistic; they suggest that there is a deep contradiction between the growth logic of capitalism and the ecological constraints posed by aggregate environmental deposits and withdrawals into local and global ecosystems (Pellow et al. 2000; Schnaiberg and Gould 1994; York and Rosa 2004). In contrast, the more optimistic advocates of the 'ecological modernization' perspective point to numerous examples of public-private partnerships that are leading to the greening of industry and to dramatic improvements in the environmental performance of some corporations (Mol and Spaargaren 2000, 2005; Scheinberg 2003; see also Freudenberg 2005). The debate has some value for understanding the potential of localist economic organizations to provide a contribution to the solution to the contradiction between the growth logic of the large, publicly traded corporation and the limits to growth imposed by the global ecosystem. Whereas the large, publicly traded corporation is heavily focused on stock market prices, short-term earnings, and overall projections of growth in revenue and sales, the small, privately held business has more freedom to integrate social and environmental responsibility goals into business decision-making without having the pressure of showing continual gains in growth and earnings. Furthermore, ownership issues aside, there is also some evidence that companies with distant headquarters pollute more than those with local headquarters (Grant et al. 2004; Princen 2002).

Although local ownership allows some degrees of freedom for business enterprises to sacrifice profits for social and environmental concerns, locally owned and independent enterprises do not necessarily develop socially and environmentally responsible practices. Of the two leading associations of locally owned, independent business associations in North America, one (the American Independent Business Alliance) focuses on the message of preserving small, independent businesses without showing much concern for environmental issues. Locally owned, independent businesses are not necessarily green, and they may lack the capital resource of large corporations that are investing in green production processes. Likewise, locally owned, independent businesses are very responsive to the values of their customers, and consequently their environmental practices vary with that of the region in which they are located.

Although there is no necessary connection between localism and environmental practices and politics, there is some evidence that localist organizations can, at least under some conditions, show a strong concern with environmental issues. The other leading association of locally owned, independent businesses in North America (the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies) does support a variant of localism that is linked to the social and environmental responsibility goals. Not all businesses that join the local chapters of the alliance are green, socially responsible, local businesses, but some of them are, and part of the mission of the association is to help businesses to develop their role as social and environmental stewards (Hess forthcoming). Furthermore, our research revealed several areas of innovation where locally owned or controlled enterprises showed some concern with environmental and/or social responsibility goals such as poverty reduction. Examples included publicly owned local electricity agencies that were investing in renewable energy, public energy conservation utilities, public transit systems that were undergoing a greening process, reuse stores that had diversified into building deconstruction and remanufacturing businesses, and nonprofit farms and community gardens (Hess et al. 2007). In some cases, there was also evidence of deep concern with poverty reduction and social

justice goals, such as in nonprofit reuse centers connected with Habitat for Humanity or urban job training programs. Those organizations showed some evidence for the emerging paradigm of 'just sustainability' at the local level, where the justice concerns associated with environmental justice organizations have converged with the environmental concerns associated with urban sustainability organizations (Agyeman et al. 2003; Agyeman 2005).

One of the areas of greatest potential for linking localism and environmental practices is through locally controlled energy development. In the USA progress on the issue is slow partly because electricity generation and transmission is largely in the hands of private corporations, and because about half of all electricity generation in the country is based on coal. Although there are a few cities that own their own generation and distribution systems, only a few of those public power cities (e.g., Austin, Sacramento, and Seattle) are leaders in the development of renewable energy and programs that address low-income consumers. Of more promise in the privatized electricity systems of the USA is the development of community choice legislation, which allows cities to aggregate consumers and develop bid requirements that include a renewable energy percentage in the purchase. Not only does aggregation reduce costs to the consumers, but when combined with urban bonds that support distributed renewable energy construction, it can create a new form of import substitution. The model program in the USA is in San Francisco (Fenn 2004; Hess et al. 2007).

The peer-reviewed literature on localism and renewable energy is to date quite limited, and much of it has tended to focus on reasons for resistance to wind farms. Local ownership, control over site location, and citizen participation in a planning process that is perceived as fair are crucial factors that have consistently affected local acceptance of new wind farms in North America and Europe (Breukers and Wolsink 2007; Firestone and Kempton 2007; Gross 2007; Jobert et al. 2007; Woods 2003). In Denmark, the decline of local, cooperative ownership and the increase in the scale of wind farms have led to increased opposition to wind power (Hvelplund 2006), and in a study of wind energy in South Wales, support was higher among older males, who were often former coal miners with beliefs more favorable to local and worker ownership (Devine-Wright 2005). In Japan, environmental and ownership considerations were primary factors that favored increased support for community wind energy (Maruyama et al. 2007). One mechanism used to garner support was to name each turbine and to have investors' names inscribed on wind towers. In Sweden, where there has been strong support for renewable energy and local control, energy companies have dominated the planning process. The result is that the energy supply framework has continued to triumph over energy conservation and renewable energy in the policy-making and planning process (Palm 2006).

Localism, food, and agriculture

Due to the significant presence of rural sociologists and interdisciplinary food and agriculture scholars, the literature on localism and agriculture is the most developed among the various industries affected by localist politics. Local food systems include farmers' markets, community gardens, local farms, locally oriented restaurants, food security and hunger organizations, retail food cooperatives, and other interconnected organizations. The literature has not yet explored the connection between local food activism and the localist movement in the small business sector as described above, but there is some awareness of the connection with import substitution as a strategy of economic development (e.g., Bellows and Hamm 2001). There are also interesting discussions of rural development that are relevant to the broader localist critique of high-tech manufacturing as the only important regional economic development strategy. For example, Marsden et al. (2002) have contrasted 'economies of scope' – or dense, locally based networks of organizations – with two alternative rural development strategies: the export-oriented, agro-industrial logic and the postproductivist approach of utilizing farmland for other activities such as tourism and recreation (see also Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

As noted above for localism in the retail sector, local food and agricultural networks sometimes show concern with sustainability and social justice issues, but the convergence is not always present. As a result, one of the themes of the food and agriculture literature is the possible divergence of interests, even the 'local trap' of assuming that local food systems are more sustainable and just than nonlocal systems (Born and Purcell 2006). Local food can cover a broad range of production techniques, of which only some would be labeled organic or even environmentally friendly. The split between local and organic is sometimes discussed as the 'bifurcation thesis', or the claim that transformation of organic farming shifted from a locally oriented social movement in the 1970s to a globally oriented industry by the early 2000s with large, organic farms that produce food for sale in distant supermarkets. Although the social movement side of the organic movement has migrated toward localist issues, the bifurcation of the organic market into an industrial and local sector may be an oversimplification. For example, an Australian study found that large, organic growers were not less likely than small growers to sell directly to local consumers (Lockie and Halpin 2005; see also Campbell and Liepins 2001; Guthman 2002, 2004).

Another issue identified in the food and agriculture literature on localism is the confusing status of 'terroir' products, or foods that are grown with a local designation (e.g., 'Vermont maple syrup') for sale largely in nonlocal markets. The foods are part of global commodity chains, and they are often conventionally grown and processed food products that utilize local branding for marketplace differentiation and a price premium (Bérard and Marchenay 2006; Giraud et al. 2005). Increasingly, large retail food corporations are also including local foods in their product offerings. In this case, locally grown food is sold locally but often via supermarket stores that are not locally owned, thereby severing local farm-to-consumer networks from locally owned, independent retail and taking profits out of the community. Consequently, this configuration of 'local food' may offer limited benefits for the localist concern of enhancing local ownership, and it may also offer limited environmental benefits. Here, the local has simply become another global brand.

Studies of the local food sector also contribute other cautions about the limitations of agro-food localism. A 'parochial' or defensive form of localism emphasizes the defense of local farms and cultural boundaries between a place-based community and its outside (Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003). The 'defensive' posture in favor of buying from local farms is not automatically linked to concerns with food quality and environmental sustainability (Winter 2003). Furthermore, the growth of direct sales via farmers' markets and farm stands can negatively affect other forms of localism, such as sales through locally owned retail stores (Morris and Buller 2003). However, the tensions and internal contradictions that food and agricultural researchers have identified also need to be juxtaposed with the potential that is also recognized in the literature. For example, it is possible to identify a more flexible form of localism that is open to issues of food diversity (Hinrichs 2003). Concern with buying from locally owned, independent farms and businesses can be linked to increased awareness of what I term 'global localism' (Hess forthcoming), such as local first campaigns that advocate a hierarchy of purchasing decisions, so that when local products are not available consumers look for fair trade and fair-made alternatives or locally owned, independent businesses that are located in other communities (Shuman 2006). To date the question of how consumers might handle or adapt such complicated concerns with the provenance of products is yet unstudied. There is concern that the various definitions of local, product quality, and labor standards can produce 'label fatigue' and confusion in the marketplace (Goodman 2004).

Another important issue that involves localism and the environment is the 'food miles' debate. Local food advocates sometimes claim that localism is inherently more sustainable because local food travels a shorter distance from the farm to the table and therefore consumes less energy. The claim was particularly disturbing to farmers in New Zealand, who depend on the export of their products to global markets, and the claim has become politically contentious, because distance may be included in emergent European food quality standards. A study from a New Zealand university found that even when transportation cost is included, dairy and mutton produced in New Zealand are more energy-

efficient, whereas onions produced in the UK consume less energy (Saunders et al. 2006). However, as localist advocate Michael Shuman (2007) has pointed out, the study did not include within nation ground transportation, which would increase the carbon budget of New Zealand lamb. The food miles debate is likely to continue as new research emerges that measures various types of food, agricultural practices, and transportation networks. Where food production is more sustainable due to lower heating costs, lower petrochemical inputs, and other factors, and where the distance between local farms and local consumers is relatively low, the total energy consumed may be lower for local food. However, because corporate food systems and supermarkets aggregate food shipments, and consumers can purchase many items on one shopping trip to a supermarket, in at least some cases the nonlocal corporate system may be more energy-efficient. Comparisons between the two systems suggest that there is considerable variability across food products (Wallgren 2006).

Concerns have also been raised about the labor practices of small farms and the potential disjuncture between the niche market of local, organic food and the broader politics of agricultural farmworker justice and urban food security (Allen et al. 2003; Dupuis et al. 2006; Guthman et al. 2006). However, others have pointed out that the survival of small farms is itself also an economic justice issue (Bell 2004). Some aspects of the local food system, such as community gardens, are obviously better positioned to address justice issues such as food security than the middle-class, farmers' markets and locally oriented restaurants (Ferris et al. 2001; Hess and Winner 2007; Lawson 2005). Again, the issue is complicated because some farmers' markets are located in low-income neighborhoods and offer food stamp services for the poor, some community-supported farms offer scholarships for low-income members, and some restaurants donate excess food to food pantries. In short, the food and agriculture literature presents a complex portrait of localism, with some aspects of local food networks performing better than others, depending in part of what type of definition of equity or justice is employed.

Conclusion

In the USA localism is a social movement built around various networks that advocate greater local ownership of the economy. In addition to the networks of advocates and activists that can be found in local communities, there are also umbrella organizations, such as the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, the American Independent Business Alliance, and various federating organizations that link together alternative food and agriculture networks. The unifying thread in the movement is shared opposition to the deleterious effects of increased corporate control over regional economies and support for efforts to regain a greater degree of local economic and political sovereignty. Among the negative effects of corporate globalization are the degradation of local environments through suburban sprawl, poor planning, pollution, and destruction of green spaces. However, as I have argued, because localism is primarily about increased local ownership, the interest in addressing environmental problems varies by organization, region, and industry. There is considerable potential for locally owned, independent business organizations and nonprofits to address environmental and social justice issues, but the potential is not always realized.

Localism has also been criticized as a potentially ineffective level or scale for political action, because the negative side effects of globalization require redress at the level of national governments and international governmental organizations (Lake 2002). In reply, advocates of localism note that political changes that limit the mobility of capital and anchor it in networks of local civic institutions can be an effective strategy to increase control over the local economy (DeFilippis 1999). Likewise, strategies of building local ownership, local regulation of nonlocal businesses (such as living wage campaigns), and local market development can be brought together effectively (Pendras 2002). Whatever one's final verdict on localism as an effective political strategy, the literature reviewed here suggests that there is a need for what Dupuis and Goodman (2005) call 'reflexive politics of localism', that is, an approach to

localism that recognizes both its strengths and weaknesses as a social movement and economic development strategy. My assessment of localism is more optimistic than theirs, but I also think that for localist campaigns and advocacy to achieve their potential, they need to be linked to broader movements and policy reforms at the national and international level.

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