

# Do Global Problems Have Local Solutions?

by  
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**O**VER THE last year and a half, a wave of protests around the world has given birth to a new movement against corporate globalization. For two decades, workers and peasants have been fighting to stop austerity measures and environmental upheavals imposed by banking and trade organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the more recently formed World Trade Organization (WTO). This fightback burst into the developed world with the international protest against the Millennium Round of WTO talks in Seattle in November 1999. Since then, wherever government ministers and bosses meet, whether for business summits or trade talks, protesters greet them with raucous demonstrations that challenge their free-market agenda. Without a doubt, the new movement reflects the most profound radicalization since the 1960s.

In the midst of this new struggle, activists are striving to develop ideas to explain our world and how to change it. In many ways, the movement has surged ahead of its ideas; activists have begun to organize against the attacks of capitalism but lack a vision of what they are fighting for. The new struggles follow the failure of Stalinism and the wreckage of Third World development schemes. As a result, a new generation is taking action without coherent theoretical frameworks to address the pressing problems of globalization, including environmental destruction and the worldwide polarization of wealth.

As people search for an alternative to corporate globalization, many are attracted to calls for a return to older, smaller, and local forms of social and economic organization. Some of today's "localists" are consciously building on a tradition that includes Gandhi's scheme for model village communities, E.F. Schumacher's 1973 book *Small is Beautiful*, or the more current views expressed in the Sierra Club's 1996 anthology, *The Case Against the Global Economy and For a Turn to the Local*.

Many others who are attracted to localist politics do not consciously belong to any tradition. They are simply trying to apply a commonsense idea: In order to counteract the inhu-

mane and destructive relationships that are wrought by the global system, we need to start with the people immediately around us to establish the kind of relationships that we would like to see spread throughout the world. Thus, in both commonsense and intellectual versions, localism is a form of "pre-figurative" politics in which local experiments can serve as models for improvements in the broader society. As such, these politics harmonize with the other main part of the Gandhian tradition: nonviolent political action, in which the means are also supposed to prefigure the ends.<sup>1</sup>

The intellectual leaders of current localist politics include Vandana Shiva, Martin Khor, Michael Schuman, David Korten and Jerry Mander. These authors have performed an important service for our movement by producing devastating critiques of the ravages of corporate power. While they do not agree on everything, they are united by their opposition to corporate globalization and their calls for local solutions of varying kinds. The localists in the advanced world call for a return to the locally based economies of the New England small town, while their co-thinkers in the developing world call for a return to the agricultural life of the peasant village. On the surface, this position looks appealing as an alternative to the power of corporations and the states that go to battle for them. Surely a return to a simpler life would be a step in the right direction.

On closer examination, however, the localist position offers no way forward. While they correctly identify many of the problems with capitalist society, the localists inaccurately romanticize older small towns and peasant economies, offer utopian blueprints, and provide no practical strategy to achieve their goals.

## **Norman Rockwell's small town**

In the advanced world, the localists set out a plan to reorganize the free market on a local level and to delink from the global economy by setting up cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, locally based labor-sharing systems, and local currencies. In so doing, they invoke a golden age of small-town capitalism. However well intentioned, this project is doomed to failure precisely because it accepts the capitalist

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market as the only alternative. The nature of the market compelled small-town capitalism to develop into its current brutal form, and those similar pressures will paralyze any attempt to rebuild the old forms within today's world.

Some of the localists of the advanced world are blunt in their support of the free market. They see nothing wrong with running businesses for profit. Michael Schuman argues that

being either for or against business is antithetical to creating self-reliant communities. It's better to sort out which kinds of businesses are the best partners for community self-reliance, and which kinds are the worst. For environmentalists, labor organizers, and other progressive activists in the United States, this means moving beyond crude tirades against corporations. For those Americans who are uncritically pro-business, this means carefully asking which kinds of businesses can best serve the interests of their community.<sup>2</sup>

David Korten proclaims that Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century theorist of the free market and author of *Wealth of Nations*, is the best guide for making capitalism work for everyone.<sup>3</sup> Others hope that by restoring small-town market relations, localists will be able to "transform corporations into dedicated servants of the common good."<sup>4</sup> Not only do they advocate capitalism in this manner, but they also reject socialism, equating it with the failure of Stalinism in Russia. Korten concludes that "trying to run an economy without markets is disastrous, as the experience of the Soviet Union demonstrated."<sup>5</sup>

But, far from the source of a solution, the free market and capitalism are the principal source of the problems so well described by many of the critics of globalization mentioned here. Under capitalism, a small minority, the bosses, owns and controls the factories, services, and stores—and employs the majority, the working class, to labor for them. The bosses exploit that labor, purchased in the free market, to make profit and to produce goods sold in the market. Competition between the bosses forces them increase workers' productivity by investing in new technology, cutting wages and benefits, and searching out cheaper labor and raw materials in other countries. The same dynamic compels them to ignore and fight against any environmental protections that would cut into their profits. And the outcome of this exploitation and competition is the return of periodic crises in which the economic system sputters and lays off workers because it has produced "too much"—not compared to people's needs but to what can be sold profitably.

The problems with the localists' support of the free market become even clearer when we see how they systematically distort the nature of historic small towns in their attempt to prove that the capitalist market can be run for the benefit of everyone. Wendell Berry and many other intellectuals present a completely romanticized conception of the "community" life of small towns. One laments the loss of the benefits formerly provided by the "kitchen table world"—the world of the family and close friends, where everybody helped each other and cared for each other without thoughts of remuneration.<sup>6</sup> They celebrate the family, community, and tradition that supposedly characterized this world. Michael Schuman claims:

[M]any of us had parents or grandparents who experienced some version of a community in which neighbors included their doctor, baker, butcher, stationer, accountant, and lawyer. Like a well-balanced eco-system, this kind of diversified economy was not easily vulnerable to outside events. Those who



**A poor farmer in the 1890s: Just when was the golden age?**

worked in small businesses, even those who didn't own property, had more of a stake in them.<sup>7</sup>

The trouble is that such towns only exist on the cartons of Ben and Jerry's ice cream and in Norman Rockwell's paintings. The localists very rarely specify the period when small-town capitalism worked for everyone, because any analysis of real small towns in the history of the U.S. would undermine the myth. Any serious historian would tell a story of class division, exploitation, and oppression. From the founding of the United States through today, local ruling classes have owned small-scale monopolies and banks, exploited workers, trapped farmers in debt, dominated the small-time political machines, and—far from isolating themselves from the rest of the world capitalist system—sought connections with it. They have been, in fact, dependent upon it. Through their loans, farm equipment, and the products they sell, local bosses have been deeply enmeshed in the market relations of their day.

Contrary to Schuman's claim, small towns of the past were subject to the economic and political crises of the world system. Periodic depressions in the economy ripped apart the fabric of small towns throughout the entire history of the United States. Far from insulated from the world's political crises, young men from small towns were repeatedly drafted to fight wars of theft and conquest from the mid-nineteenth century right up through Vietnam. Moreover, the actual working of small towns gives the lie to the notion of "community" expounded by these writers—and reveals the nasty class antagonisms built into early capitalism.

Far from leading happy lives and musing about nature at

the kitchen table, farmers worked long hours, suffered chronic debt to the banks, and were more than happy to escape their miserable conditions. Poor farmers were so oppressed by these conditions and unhappy with their crushing debts that they started the mass populist movement to fight the banks and the bosses toward the end of the nineteenth century. Historian Harvey Wasserman writes:

[B]y the 1890s there were 9 million farm mortgages, a ransom on the land of nearly \$4 billion. In 1890, 53 percent of the farms in Iowa were mortgaged, 49 percent in New Jersey, 30 percent in Massachusetts, and there were more mortgages than families in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska. Families poured their lives into the land for years only to have it taken away after one bad season. After the drought of 1887, at least 11,000 Kansas families were evicted. Twenty towns in the western part of the state were left to the ghosts.<sup>8</sup>

The farm crisis drove one populist orator, Mary Lease of Kansas, to promise that farmers were going

to raise less corn and more hell.... We want money, land and transportation.... We will stand by our homes and stay by our firesides by force if necessary, and we will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the government pays its debts to us. The people are at bay, let the bloodhounds of money who have dogged us thus far beware."<sup>9</sup>

These are not the happy farmers of the localist's myth.

Workers in the early manufacturing system of small towns were not any happier. They fought their bosses to unionize their workplaces and to improve their conditions from the very beginning of the American republic. Workers organized on the docks, in ships, and in the factories. They organized in the quarries of Vermont, in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and, of course, on the railways that connected the national economy to the ports and thereby to the world. Workers fought the bosses in the real small towns.

The oppressed also found the small towns wanting. Women and gays found small-town life, precisely because of the family and traditional values with all of their prejudice and claustrophobia, to be not havens of support, but traps of oppression to escape. Women—especially rural women—were tied to a daily routine of drudgery unimaginable today, slaving over wood stoves, washing clothes by hand, and tending to various other interminable chores. And it goes without saying that Blacks first fled the slavery of early American small towns of the South, and later they fled the Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, and poverty to find jobs in the big industrial centers of the North.

For the laboring majority in small towns during eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, the standard of living was abysmal. Few had opportunity for education, most had—at best—infrequent visits to a doctor, and the primitive economic development meant that working conditions were backward, backbreaking, and difficult. This society is no alternative to romanticize.

Nevertheless, the localists propose building local economies based on this mythic past. They want to localize capital, agriculture, and industry through setting up cooperatives and other similar systems. These are impractical for most workers in the advanced capitalist countries. The vast majority of people live in and around large cities and are completely dependent on these metropolitan areas for work and consump-

tion. Less than 2 percent of America's population is still involved with the farm economy. Moreover, about 2 percent of farms, the large industrial ones, produce 50 percent of the food in the U.S., while 75 percent of farms, mainly the smaller ones, produce only 9 percent of total output.<sup>10</sup> The market system, in other words, has made the localists' plans outmoded through urbanization and the massive concentration of both agricultural and industrial production in a small number of hands. New small operations, whether cooperatively organized or not, face the same pressures to compete and expand—or die—that led to the growth and consolidation of big capital units in the first place.

The various proposals for reorganizing local economies also presume a tremendous amount of time, something that most workers do not have. Most people now work more than 40 hours per week, and the poorer sections of the working class often work two or three part-time jobs just to make ends meet. Add to that the need to care for families and loved ones, plus some leisure time to maintain sanity, and very few workers have time or energy left to volunteer for cooperative enterprises and other such projects. That's why coops tend to be disproportionately middle class, staffed by people who have more time and money to try these experiments than most workers do. Coops such as these may improve some aspects of some people's lives, but they don't constitute a strategy for changing the broader society, since they don't produce models that can be generalized outside their special circumstances.

Moreover, local production will not be able to supplant large-scale industrial production of things such as computers, trains, tractors, and other equipment. Things as simple as postal delivery require regional, national, and international coordination. Localists will either have to argue to give these things up and accept impoverished conditions—and therefore not be able to produce enough to meet society's needs—or to accept their dependence on the wider system. And once that dependency is recognized, they will necessarily succumb to the wider pressure of competition, exploitation, environmental destruction, and crisis endemic to the system as a whole.

Coops provide the best examples of this pattern. While coops express people's urge to build a noncompetitive and egalitarian society, they cannot survive as islands within the capitalist system. Coops face the choice of becoming full-scale businesses, selling out to large-scale monopolies, going bankrupt, or remaining on the margins of the wider society.

The Mondragon Cooperative, which was for a long time a localist example of success, illustrates the problem of coops within the system. Set up in the 1940s in the Basque region of Spain, the cooperative began as a vocational school that eventually launched its worker-owned factory in 1956. The cooperative then spawned its own bank, built up a large network of worker-owned factories, and established its own retail network with nearly \$3 billion in annual sales. However, workers never actually directly controlled the cooperative. There has always been a managerial body, which, especially in the 1990s, has become increasingly autocratic. So, Mondragon was never the worker's paradise that commentators make it out to be.

After Spain's bosses opted for integration with the European Union in the 1970s, the pressures of international competition forced the coop to transform in order to maintain its profits. The cooperative leaders formed their own executive

board, the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation (MCC), centralized control in their hands, and signed contracts with capitalist firms in low-wage countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Mexico, Argentina, Thailand, and China. Moreover, even inside Spain, the MCC has started to hire workers who are not coop members. Those workers now comprise approximately one-third of the labor force and, as nonmembers, are dispensable. This has led to increasing class conflict between workers and the current management. One worker told reporters that “cooperativism doesn’t work” and denied that Mondragon could “flourish as a cooperative island in a capitalist world.”<sup>11</sup>

The cooperative worked for a while in the specific conditions of Spain’s isolated and backward economy under Franco’s fascist dictatorship. But with development, competition, and integration into the EU, the cooperative became a capitalist firm. The Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg explained how this tragedy is inevitable for coops:

As a result of competition, the complete domination of the process of production by the interests of capital—that is, pitiless exploitation—becomes a condition of the survival of each enterprise.... In other words, use is made of all the methods that enable an enterprise to stand up against its competitors in the market. The workers forming a cooperative in the field of production are thus faced with the contradictory necessity of governing themselves with the utmost absolutism. They are obliged to take toward themselves the role of the capitalist entrepreneur—a contradiction that accounts for the failure of production cooperatives, which either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers’ interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving.<sup>12</sup>

Luxemburg also pointed out that the same “sound business” logic makes cooperatives incapable of addressing the worst problem of the labor market: unemployment.<sup>13</sup> So, cooperatives prove again to be poor models because their beneficial effects cannot spread to the whole society as long as the market system remains.

This harsh fate for coops also applies to the localists’ other proposals. Many farm activists, recognizing the many evils of industrial agriculture, have tried to set up systems of community supported agriculture (CSA).

In a CSA project, a group of consumers form a sort of cooperative with an individual farmer or small group of farms. The members agree to share the risks of farming with the farmers. If the crop is abundant, the sharers get more food; if there is a crop failure, they get less. Unlike other fresh market vegetable sales, CSA sharers sign a contract to pay in advance, or in regular installments, for the entire season. The farmers develop a budget and divide their annual costs by the number of shares to arrive at the approximate price of a share.<sup>14</sup>

Like other coops, CSA has obvious problems. Given its local nature, consumers will not be able to meet all of their needs, since some foods will not be produced in their climates. For example, no farmer is going to grow oranges in Vermont! Moreover, given that this system will also make the food supply more vulnerable to climatic bad luck such as droughts and early frosts, consumers will still be dependent on the broader and more stable system of industrial agriculture. As one commentator put it,

A left analysis would question whether this pathway is really a solution to the problems or rather something that will produce only a minor irritant to the corporate dominance of the

food system. A complete transformation of the agriculture and food system, it might be argued, requires a complete transformation of the society.<sup>15</sup>

Again, similar problems plague other localist proposals, such as those regarding local currency. While it can coordinate small-scale exchange systems between small businesses, local currency cannot replace the national currency needed to purchase industrial products such as cars and trains. Nor would you ever be able to use it to buy a stamp from the post office. If the currency ever truly challenged these areas, the federal government would certainly terminate it.

That raises the final problem for all localist projects in advanced capitalist economies: the question of power. To enact many of these schemes at an extensive level requires political power. But the reality is that the ruling class, which owns the massive industrial, service, and agricultural system, controls the levers of political power and will squelch localist schemes that interfere with its interests. Moreover, even in small towns, big capital still rules, setting the behavior of local government by pouring into and threatening to withdraw money if the local government challenges its interests.

The retreat to small-town agriculture and local production is a pipe dream for social change. The worst danger of this utopian localism is that it will lead to a retreat from the struggle to change the system itself. Kirkpatrick Sale practically endorses this flight from struggle:

Obviously, it will take a considerable change in attitude before our industrial society begins first to abandon the notion of controlling and remaking the world in the name of a global monoculture and then to realize that maybe what it calls provincial is merely the kind of minding-your-own-business attention to local reforms that might just save the world.<sup>16</sup>

This is not a strategy for change; whatever its radical rhetoric, small-town localism amounts to surrender to the forces it despises.

### Time for hard labor in the South?

Third World writers such as Vandana Shiva propose a similar return to earlier economic organization: peasant subsistence agriculture. While there is no doubt that capitalist penetration of traditional farming has been devastating in the developing world, the proposed return to subsistence farming is based on a second golden-age myth. It offers no way forward for the growing percentage of workers in the Third World who labor for wages on the land and in the expanding cities of the South.

This golden-age portrayal is hard to take seriously. Shiva and others celebrate peasant life as being ecologically in tune with nature, egalitarian, and capable of meeting the world’s food needs. But this romanticizes a rural life whose reality has meant poverty and backbreaking labor for countless generations of peasants. Shiva writes:

A worldview of abundance is the worldview of women in India who leave food for ants on their doorstep, even as they create the most beautiful art in kolams, mandalas and rangoli with rice flour. Abundance is the worldview of peasant women who weave beautiful designs of paddy to hang up for birds when the birds do not find grain in the field. This view of abundance recognizes that, in giving food to other beings and species, we maintain conditions for our own food security....

Each individual life form must learn to enjoy its benefits by farming a part of the system in close relationship with other species. Let not any one species encroach upon others rights.<sup>17</sup>

While Shiva's romanticism is part of a left-leaning attack on agribusiness, the same romanticism in the hands of Edward Goldsmith becomes a frankly right-wing justification of Third World poverty. After condemning the violence and alienation of modern Western society, he writes:

[T]hese problems are conspicuous by their absence in societies that have not yet been fully atomized; that is where individuals haven't been cut adrift from their family and community. Even today, for instance, one can walk in total safety through the poorest slums of Calcutta, where large numbers of people are homeless and sleep on the pavement. This is so because such people do not suffer the terrible social deprivation of an atomized society. They may be poor and hungry, but the life they lead is still within in their family groups, and it has meaning to them—which is ever less the case of the lives led by most people in the industrial world.<sup>18</sup>

This picture of the happy pauper is completely reactionary. Goldsmith goes even further, ridiculing the idea of liberation!<sup>19</sup>

Peasant life today or in the past is not something that should be celebrated as an alternative to the ravages of corporate globalization. Raymond Williams describes the lives of peasants under feudalism this way:

[T]he social order within which this agriculture was practiced was as hard and as brutal as anything later experienced. Even if we exclude the wars and brigandage to which it was commonly subject, the uncountable thousands who grew crops and reared beasts only to be looted and burned and led away with tied wrists, this economy, even at peace, was an order of exploitation of a most thoroughgoing kind: a property in men as well as land; a reduction of most men to working animals, tied by forced tribute, forced labor, or bought and sold like beasts; protected by law and custom only as animals and streams are protected, to yield more labor, more food, more blood.<sup>20</sup>

Lest someone accuse Williams of having a Eurocentric view of peasant life, here is Ram Dass, a low-caste Indian peasant describing his own life under the landlord's cane through the course of the twentieth century:

The zamindars' [landlords'] attitude was: "obey my order or leave my village." You had to do what they wanted you to do, and if you didn't, you had to run away. If we uttered a word, they would take off their shoes and beat us. If we didn't understand their order properly, they would beat us. And that's how time passed, my ancestors', my parents', and mine. We had to finish working for them and only then could we do our own work. We had to finish working for them before we could work on the land we had rented from them. Sometimes when we rented land, we would have planted the crops, tended the harvested them, and then the zamindars would come and take away the harvest! Or they would put their

horses and bullocks in our field to graze. They would harass us in every possible way. And we couldn't find refuge because they even owned the house we lived in. If you can't find protection in your own home, where can you go?<sup>21</sup>

For precisely these reasons, peasants around the world have a history of rebellion against the landlords before the development of capitalism and since. Through these insurrections, peasants have aspired to better lives by seizing control of land. But as the editors of the *North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA)* wrote in a recent special issue on peasant struggle, there is a danger in

romanticizing rural struggles. Rural social movements face daunting conditions. Aside from the difficulties of mobilizing and sustaining activism—which should not be underestimated—small-scale agriculture remains underdeveloped, largely sidestepped by productive investment and appropriate technology, and enmeshed, in many countries, in neofeudal types of social relations.<sup>22</sup>

It's particularly hard to believe Shiva's portrayal of women's lives in peasant India. One anthropologist writes:

[T]here is a common belief (outside India at least) that in Indian villages some kind of "moral economy" operates to provide social security to widows and other helpless members of society even when they have no close relatives to look after them. Whether such an institution ever existed is an open question, but even if it did, evidence of its survival to the present day is hard to find.<sup>23</sup>

In reality, women in peasant India suffer exploitation, poverty, caste oppression, and gender oppression. The much-celebrated family and community are mechanisms of discrimination against women in peasant society. Celebrating these conditions as some kind of "ecotopia" offers no path to liberation for women and,

worse, endorses feudal backwardness and its horror as the alternative for impoverished Indian masses.

In fact, many Indian peasant women flee these village conditions to find work in sweatshops in large cities. Their flight from the village to wage labor, if they can find it, is not liberation from exploitation and oppression, but for many, especially for women, it offers the chance of escape from the oppressive conditions back home. In her book, *The Power to Choose*, Naila Kabeer documents precisely this partial experience of liberation from village and familial oppression among women working in the garment factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She writes:

Many women had made the decision to migrate to the cities precisely to circumvent the most restrictive aspects of the "moral community" of the village and escape into the relative anonymity of urban life, where they could take up whatever livelihood they could find without incurring the censure of their community or bringing shame on their kin.<sup>24</sup>

One of the women, Shanu, conveyed this sense of freedom when she told Kabeer:

***The social order of feudal peasant agriculture was as hard and as brutal as anything later experienced—an order of exploitation of a most thoroughgoing kind.***

■ Raymond Williams

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We couldn't say a word before we started working. If I had not been working, my husband would have ordered me to look after his children and see to their needs.... If one works, one has different rights. If you are at home and do not earn, then the man is more powerful.<sup>25</sup>

While the conditions of labor in these garment factories are no doubt wretched, they do offer women workers the chance to escape from the village—and the chance to fight collectively in working-class organizations to improve wages and conditions.

The romanticizing localists, who do not understand this dynamic, repeatedly complain that peasants dissatisfied with their lives aspire to better and easier conditions in the urban economy. They see this as peasants losing their culture and adopting western values. Thus, Martin Khor talks of the need to “deprogram Third World peoples away from the modern culture that has penetrated our societies so that life-styles, personal motivations, and status structure can be delinked from the system of industrialism and its corresponding creation of culture.”<sup>26</sup> In her praise of the simpler lifestyles of the Tibetan Ladakh people, Helena Norberg-Hodge even goes so far as to lament the introduction of roads and electric lights as “artificial needs.”<sup>27</sup> The idea that modern amenities are somehow “bad” for rural cultures but apparently good (e.g., access to printing presses) for people such as Helena Norberg-Hodge, is simply elitist.

Not only do the localists wrongly romanticize rural agricultural societies, their program of going back to this mythical life has no chance of being implemented. Multinationals and Third World companies have bought up large tracts of land, flooded the market with cheaper produce, and driven peasants out of the countryside and into the cities to find jobs, if they're lucky, as workers in factories. Therefore, contrary to Shiva's claim that “the South is the peasant,” peasants are increasingly becoming proletarianized. As the NACLA editors state, “in the mid-1990s, the World Bank reported that for the first time in history less than half the world's workforce—49 percent—worked in agriculture.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, a growing percentage of those still engaged in agricultural labor are landless, wage laborers more proletarian in nature than peasant.

Farshad Araghi likens this massive transformation of peasants into landless wage laborers to the “enclosures” in England that privatized common lands and drove peasants into cities in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. He documents that “between 1950 and 1990, the share of labor force in agriculture declined by 33 percent in the world and fell by 40 percent in the Third World.”<sup>29</sup> These millions have found their ways to cities. In Latin America, 75 percent of the population is urban, and two thirds of its peasants are semi-proletarianized.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Asia is more uneven. With countries such as India possessing large rural populations while countries such as South Korea and Japan are almost completely urban and proletarian.<sup>31</sup> Africa is similarly uneven. Moreover, though over 70 percent of India's population is still dependent upon agriculture, the relative weight of agriculture as a percentage of GDP has steadily declined. In 1980, agriculture accounted for 38 percent of GDP; industry and manufacturing, 24 percent and 16 percent respectively. By 1998, agriculture accounted for 25 percent of GDP; industry and manufacturing, 30 percent and 19 percent respectively.<sup>32</sup> This transformation of the developing world has made the localist dream of peasant agriculture impossible to realize.

Finally, even if it was possible to return, the kind of peasant agriculture the localists romanticize simply could not meet the food needs of the world. The productivity of such forms of agriculture is simply inadequate.

### Forward, not backward

The localists' two principal strategies of fighting the system are utopian. The societies they worship were (and are) not what they claim they are, and in any case, there is no way to reconstruct them. They offer no bridge from the present society to the future (or, in their case, the past) society they desire. They can't use the state, which the capitalist class controls. They are shut out of the policy-making circles and intellectual corridors that are dominated by lackeys of the ruling class. To their credit, many call for resistance and participate in street protests, but they can't imagine how to turn this resistance into the transformation of society.

Typically, they find refuge in calls for changes in values. Wolfgang Sachs, for example, calls “for a cultural effort to shake off the hegemony of aging western values and gradually retire from the development race.”<sup>33</sup> But how is this call for cultural change going to convince Monsanto or General Electric to change their ways? Recognizing this, Robert Goodland naively hopes that “our leaders...recognize that growth has reached its limit and decide to reduce further expansion in the scale of the economy.”<sup>34</sup> Paul Hawken, in his *Ecology of Commerce*, presents a massive blueprint for an ecological society but then concedes that “nothing written, suggested, or proposed is possible unless business is willing to embrace the world we live within and lead the way.”<sup>35</sup>

In these remarks, Goodland and Hawken display not only their powerlessness but also their misunderstanding of how capitalism and social change really work. The bosses don't choose to grow; the competitive nature of the system drives them to do so or die. Here again, the “prefigurative” politics of localism fails the test of reality. Localists hope to reach their aims through the willful purification of people's means and motives. But this voluntarist view misses an important point about social change: The motivations that are shared widely enough to change the world are the ones that come out of widely shared circumstances—not out of a social theorist's plans for a better society. The bosses' circumstances motivate them to keep the world of exploitation pretty much as it is. It is workers' circumstances that motivate them to fight back—even if they're not always clear about how to fight or what to fight for.

Marx and Engels diagnosed this impasse in utopian thinking in their arguments against the localists' forbears in the early nineteenth century, the utopian socialists such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. These critics of capitalism designed and, in some cases, tried to set up model productive communities that would avoid the horrors of the factory system. They usually appealed for support to the bourgeoisie itself—in part because the proletariat,

as yet in its infancy, offers to [the utopians] the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement.... Only from the point of being the most suffering class does the proletariat exist for them.<sup>36</sup>

Since, in their eyes, there was no class that could provide the social force to rebuild society on a cooperative, egalitarian



WILLIAM ARCHIE—KRT

**Making cars in Mexico: More peasants are becoming workers**

basis, the utopians emphasized the force of their own ideas, plans, and “systems”:

For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society?

Hence, they reject all political, and especially revolutionary action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavor, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social gospel.<sup>37</sup>

Despite making criticisms such as these, Marx and Engels sympathized with the earliest utopians (if not their later followers)—because the utopians recognized and tried to fight the evils of capitalism. They simply had the misfortune to form their ideas about changing the world before the most powerful means of fighting capitalism—collective workers’ struggle—had really taken shape.

Likewise, most of the people entering the struggle today have not had the chance to “discover” the power of class struggle. This is not surprising, especially in this country, given the low level of strikes and the frequency of setbacks for workers in the past 25 years. Many of these new activists are attracted to localist politics. Even if they like the idea, in the abstract, of rebuilding the collective power of the working class, the task can look huge and distant in a country with no mass workers’ party to join—and with no union organization in most work-

places. On the other hand, prefigurative, localist politics seems to offer immediate if small results, since it calls on us to make a new world starting here—wherever we are—and now—with whatever human and other materials we’ve got.

But when it gets down to spelling out the localist vision in fuller terms, the theorists of localism begin to look backward to a time before the full development of capitalism—and thus begin to reject once again the possibility of an active, fighting role for the working class. In fact, workers’ struggle gets in the way of making appeals either to the bourgeoisie or to all people regardless of class. The middle-class aim of nurturing a friendly atmosphere to go into business interferes with the working-class option of drawing the battle lines to go into struggle. It’s not a question of what class an individual activist comes from; it’s a question of choosing which larger class forces to align oneself with. For example, Rosa Luxemburg’s criticism of coops was part of a wider attack on middle-class politics within the workers’ movement, and Luxemburg herself was a lifelong proponent of workers’ internationalism even though she was born into a petty-bourgeois Polish family.

The full development of the utopian vision, as Marx and Engels recognized, can even travel a twisted path from progressive impulses all the way to quite backward conclusions. The successors of Fourier and Owen even joined the “reactionary conservative Socialists” to oppose the growth of the mass workers’ movement.<sup>38</sup> Of these reactionaries, Engels writes that they are

adherents of a feudal and patriarchal society which has already been destroyed, and is still daily being destroyed, by big industry and world trade and their creation, bourgeois society. [They] conclude from the evils of existing society that feudal and patriarchal society must be restored because it was free of such evils.... [These people,] for all their seeming partisanship and their scalding tears for the misery of the proletariat, are nevertheless energetically opposed by the communists for the following reasons: (1) it strives for something impossible; (2) it seeks to establish the rule of.... a society which was to be sure free of the evils of present-day society but which brought with it at least as many evils without even offering to the oppressed workers the prospect of liberation through a communist revolution.<sup>39</sup>

There is no going back, unless we want to recreate the scarcity of the past—and unless we want to recreate the very conditions of small-time capitalism that led, through market logic, to the growth of the megacorporations. Capitalism produces unheard-of degradation. But it is the productive capacity created by capitalism that makes possible a new society free of exploitation. As Engels pointed out long ago, the development of human productive forces “alone make possible a state of society in which there are no longer class distinctions or anxiety over the means of subsistence for the individual, and in which for the first time there can be talk of real human freedom, of an existence in harmony with the laws of nature that have become known.”<sup>40</sup>

The localists are right to point out that people’s inhumane relations to each other and irrational relations to the environment both stem from our economic relations. But they are wrong about how to transform these production relations. We can’t build prefigurative “cell forms” of cooperation that will multiply to overtake the broader competitive, profit-driven

structure—because these “cells” are themselves shaped by the market and must follow the destructive logic of profitability.

If the economic system can't be transformed piece by piece, it must somehow be confronted “all at once.” That requires a revolution, and it also requires that our movement take a *political* form. We must unite workers—those who have the interest and strategic social position to change the economic structure—into a mass political force to overturn and replace the bourgeois state. To build such a movement, our organizations must be flexible enough to build and to bind together today's struggles against *all* of the system's atrocities from unemployment, sexism, and environmental destruction to racism, police brutality, and war. To accomplish this varied task, we can't be trapped into the dead end of small-time economic construction. Even when the movement's struggle takes an economic form, as it often does, the strongest position from which to fight is as employees against our bosses—not as members of small coops that are isolated from the major leverage points of the economy.

So most stages of the movement will not resemble the ultimate goal, except perhaps in the solidarity of struggle or in the democracy of the movement's fighting organizations. But once we cast off the prefigurative view of politics, we can see more easily the real seeds of a better future. The evidence abounds of the growing weight and combativeness of the world's working class. From the Daewoo workers' battle to stop layoffs in South Korea to the mass strikes in Latin America against IMF plans to French workers' battles against privatization, the world's working class is beginning to demonstrate its potential. And workers in the U.S.—who face a struggle to rebuild their organizations and confidence—have gone through a radicalization in the disappointing Clinton years, which could easily explode into mass action under George W. Bush.

Now, with the international labor movement beginning to unite across borders to fight corporate globalization, we can see the possibility of building an international movement of the majority to remake society to serve human need instead of profit. Workers' fightback is the alternative to localist dreams. It offers humanity the only hope of going forward.

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