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Decentralization - Embracing Community

by
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(Any mistakes in this essay are mine alone)

The Trend

Admittedly, on some level, globalization will always be a reality. For example, faster and more omnipresent means of communication like the internet, and faster and better modes of human transportation. But that is not what this essay is about. Rather, this essay is about decentralizing towards the local, when and where it makes the most sense to do so. My working hypothesis is that it makes sense now, and almost everywhere.

America and the world would be better off, much better off, if and when decentralizing principles were pursued. The history of the world has generally been in one direction and in one direction only - toward greater and greater centralization, with all the attendant assumptions of economies of scale, economic expansion, investment opportunities, wealth creation, job creation, etc., and away from decentralization and localization. It is past time these positive assumptions that attend the political economy of ever increasing centralization, concentration, and globalization are called into question. In different words, the positive assumptions regarding ever increasing centralization need to be called into question. Not only is smaller and decentralized a more comfortable fit, but it also makes the best sense in economic and political terms as well.

Of course, greater economic concentration in fewer and fewer hands is also a detriment to this grand experiment we call democracy. It appears that we are at a point in our American history in which big corporations have too much say over how we govern ourselves. All too often, large corporations decide who is elected as congressman, as state legislators, as governors, and

as judges. The power is too concentrated in their hands and not diffused enough throughout the citizenry.

Ongoing globalization per se, is undeniable. This state of affairs, in my opinion, has done more harm than good. Unless, of course, you happen to be near the top of the corporate and financier class, whose members have benefited greatly at the expense of everyone else, including the ecological health of planet Earth herself.

Only in recent decades has the idea of limits to growth even been acknowledged. Soil, water, and air pollution were finally seen as real problems in the 1970's; and now global warming or climate change is part of the mix, and rightfully so. But, as Wolfgang Sachs has noted, "...limits to road building, high-speed transport, economic concentration, production of chemicals, large-scale cattle ranching, and so on, were not even considered at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio." (The Case Against the Global Economy, ed. by Jerry Mander, Edward Goldsmith, 1996; Sierra Club Books, ISBN: 0-87156-865-9). I would also add big Pharma or big Drug companies instead of simple tried and true home or natural remedies.

Ask any high school or college student today about limits to the economic growth machine and they will be able to relate. They get it. They understand how non-renewable resources are gobbled up at an ever increasing pace. They understand melting ice shelves due to global warming. They understand that vast tracks of rain forest and jungle disappear every day, being transformed into semi-barren grazing land for cattle, all for more McDonald hamburgers. They understand that eating more burgers means less and less rain forest. They get it. But not only are tropical rain forests disappearing at an alarming rate, but the same is true for prime American farmland. For example, from 2002 to 2008 America lost 16 million acres of farmland. It was lost primarily to cookie cutter housing developments, shopping centers, highways, and the like. In the state of Ohio alone, 616,000 acres were lost between 2002 and 2007. (*Columbus Dispatch*, pg. B1, Sun. Feb. 22, 2009, Columbus, Ohio)

This state of affairs is increasingly unhealthy for people, animals, and the earth itself.

Is there a solution? If so, what is it? We will get there in time, but for the moment, a conscious effort towards principles that involve decentralizing towards the local, with a steady focus on something called the Green Economy, would go a long ways towards a sustainable solution.

So what does one mean by decentralizing and localizing? First of all, it's about smaller, not bigger. Second, it's about sustainability, not growth. Third, it's about developing non-polluting renewable energy resources. Fourth, it's about buying local products, services, and food when possible, and also growing some of your own food. Fifth, it's about focusing on ones locale or region. Sixth, it's about emphasizing useful trade skills like plumbing, making shoes and clothing, electrical, auto repair, animal husbandry, vegetable gardening, etc. Seventh, it's also about manufacturing solar cells and windmills; whose size can be geared to the individual household or neighborhood level, giving homeowners almost complete control over their own energy future, which equates directly to a full measure of economic and political independence and autonomy. That is, independence and autonomy from corporate and governmental control.

The Green Economy:

Decentralizing towards the local merges wonderfully with the concept of what is commonly referred to as the Green Economy. What is the Green Economy? First, it is an economy that does not emphasize large highly centralized energy sources concentrated in the hands of a few and distributed for a price, to the many, such as big coal, big nuclear, or big natural gas power plants. It is just the opposite: small local power stations, heavily augmented by solar collectors and small windmills. Additionally, small solar collectors and small current-generation windmills can be attached to individual homes. A Green Economy is not based on food traveling hundreds or even thousands of miles before it is eaten; rather it is locally grown food eaten in season, maybe especially in ones own backyard. When dining on out-of-state or out-of-country food, the energy and pollution implications are enormous. The Green Economy is not based on gas guzzling vehicles; rather on fuel stingy vehicles and alternate modes of transportation. A Green Economy is not based on citizens living far from their place of employment; rather on living close to work or telecommuting. A Green Economy is not based on complexity per se, but on a dynamic

simplicity that mimics mother nature herself. A Green Economy does not emphasize or function on the throw-away mentality; rather it thrives on the dynamics of recycling - almost anything and everything.

I would suggest, all this and more, is representative of the Green Economy.

It is my belief that integrating the Green Economy in a decentralized manner in local communities will go far towards a more stable economy and polity. Moreover, the Green Economy is almost by definition - local and decentralized.

For the most part, this is what a sustainable future will depend on.

Some Roadblocks

Perhaps the biggest roadblock to all that has been noted thus far is something called Globalization. This thing called globalization assumes ever increasing profits for the few, at the expense of the many. Multinational or Transnational corporations, (MNC's or TNC's), are set up to make money and maximize profits. Period. Much of the time, they do not pay much attention to paying a living wage to workers, ensuring safe and decent working conditions, limiting the hours worked per day, allowing any type of labor union activity, etcetera. And they certainly don't appear to be overly concerned with the ecosystem and natural environment unless legally compelled to be.

Many TNC's operating budgets and profits dwarf the gross domestic product or GDP of many Third World Countries or Less Developed Countries, (LDC's). This economic power of TNC's translates directly into political power. And this is where many of the current problems of exploitation are exacerbated and perpetuated for still greater profits. That is, via cozy political connections with host governments.

Then we have certain international institutions to aid and abet the TNC's in their quest for keeping an uneven playing field tilted and in place, to the detriment of the workers in a specific country or industry.

Some international institutions, like the International Monetary Fund, (IMF), and the World Bank may have done some good in the world over the years, but from what I can tell, more often they have greatly impeded the advance of indigenous peoples around the world. More than that, these institutions have sucked the economic lifeblood and hope from local populations by striking deals with the host country dictator, a dictator that often times America installed or helped install; take your pick, Guatemala in the early 1950's, Chile in the mid 1970's, Iran in the late 1970's, and it's still an open question about Iraq and Afghanistan today. How? By being cozy with these local dictators who help suppress any worker dissent, and help ensure the TNC's will continue to have a stable workforce of modern day slave laborers. And many times the TNC's are supervising big mega-projects, like a big nuclear plant or dam that the country did not need in the first place. And because it's a big project, the countries' population pays interest and principle on loans for mega-projects that they did not need in the first place. But, the cruel dictators are lavishly rewarded for their ability to keep the population in line, usually with intimidation and violence. Thus, the workforce is maintained and sustained, but on fear, not freedom. This is not exactly in line with American values. And all too often, these policies are implemented with the economic support of U.S. taxpayers as part and parcel of misguided and counterproductive American foreign policies. Don't expect to see this on the network news. Why? Only six corporations own all the major networks today, controlling 80% of the major media we consume. Those corporations benefit directly from worker exploitation in the Third World because they are tied into the TNC's or are a TNC themselves. The big six are Time Warner, Walt Disney, Viacom, News Corp., CBS Corporation, and NBC Universal.

Most Americans love freedom and democracy and believe that everyone everywhere should be free and live in a democracy. However, many financiers, corporate leaders, and politicians that happen to be at or near the top of the power pyramid only talk freedom and democracy, they don't mean it. What they really mean to do is to maximize profits for themselves and their friends in the name of freedom, democracy, and fair-play capitalism. Of course, what they really do has little to do with freedom, democracy, fair play, or capitalism.

Having said the above, it is important not to taint the good with the bad. Obviously, not all people at the top of the power pyramid have evil or selfish intentions. But I submit that they are under constant scrutiny and pressure by many of their peers, pressure to tow- the-line for the military-industrial-corporate complex.

The Big Five Current Issues

1. Relatively stagnant economic conditions
2. Climate Change / Global Warming
3. Energy resource sustainability
4. Security / Wars
5. Inequality

Economy

Most observers and commentators say the world wide recession started with the American housing crisis. Okay, but let us take a hard look at the lenders and the Federal Reserve. Why bail out the folks who caused the problem? Why not help those who suffered the mistakes of the big bankers and Wall Street?

Climate Change / Global Warming

In many ways the developed world has more to learn from the non-developed world than the reverse. In different words, the small, the village, the decentralized, the self-sustaining, the low carbon footprint communities in far flung corners of the world have much to teach the developed world. Let us begin to listen and learn.

Energy Resource Sustainability

All the big five issues are certainly connected, but it is most evident when considering the issue of sustaining our energy resources. The obvious way to proceed is for America to develop it's own renewable and sustainable energy resources. Yet, up until recently America was almost exclusively focused on the fossil fuel non-renewable economy.

Security / Wars

It appears the more America strives for increased national security the more insecure we become. Why do we have this apparent paradox? The more we spend on national security measures, the more people around the world dislike America. What is the story here? Also, and unfortunately, there is seldom a time when somewhere in the world a major war or conflict is not underway. That is just a fact. Why?

Inequality

The gap within and between societies continues to grow. This can only auger for greater unrest and instability as that gap continues to grow. It's interesting that many Americans shout against any form of socialism, right up until they lose their jobs. Then suddenly, some socialistic ideas are not so bad, like unemployment insurance.

Debates in the U.S. Congress miss the point on basic international fairness and equality issues. People say, even Congressman say things like, "So what if workers in Central America have to work 12 – 14 hours per day for one or two dollars. How does that adversely affect America?" Well, for starters, it breeds unrest and instability within those countries. And if we expect those countries to be stable trading partners, we are undermining that hopeful expectation by underwriting official repression in those countries by agreements like CAFETA and NAFTA. Poor pay, unsafe working conditions, long hours for the workers, and one-sided unfair and exploitive profits for the owners and key political leaders, and it's all legally codified in these unfair and counterproductive trade agreements. Not to mention a polluted natural environment.

And last, such things are not in line with American values.

Additionally, if a worker stands up and tries to assert a modicum of worker rights; like pay and working conditions; or dares to mention the word, "labor union", she is immediately dealt with by management and local political leaders and called a Communist or Marxist and dealt with harshly. Indeed, sometimes she simply disappears! It is what happened in Guatemala in the 50's, Chile in the 70's, Iran in the 70's, and seemingly

ongoing in other parts of the world, especially in parts of Africa and increasingly the Middle East.

We as Americans should do everything we can to not be a party to such economic and political violence and poverty. Rather, we should foster a more humane, mutually productive workplace. For starters, our major trade agreements should be renegotiated and we should pull out of the World Trade Organization (WTO) until and unless the poorest of the poor in all countries, including our own, get a fair shake.

What is a fair shake for workers?

1. Legal for workers to collectively organize in order to bargain with employers.
2. Paid a living wage.
3. Safe working conditions.
4. Adequate work breaks.
5. Limit hours worked per day and per week.
6. No employer repression of workers.
7. No government repression of workers.
8. Fair treatment of all workers per a mutual agreement of some kind between the employer and employees, even if it's only a simple MOU or Memorandum of Understanding.

To me, these above points are very reasonable worker requests.

A Word on Growth and Globalization

Various international institutions like the World Bank claim to aid and assist developing countries realize their economic aspirations. Evidence amply indicates that the World Bank, founded in 1944, has never lived up to its primary stated goal of genuinely helping poor countries. In fact, just the reverse is true. The World Bank is a big part of the exploitive process whereby loans are extended to friendly dictators for ports, airports, dams, highways, and power plants that a country does not need or necessarily want. Yet the marketeers extrodinaire of the World Bank paint a rosy picture for potential borrowers that all will get better and everyone will climb up the socio-economic ladder together.

The World Bank as the lender gets all the benefits of the long term loan repayments, even if the interest rate is low, while the poor country gets projects that create temporary jobs, but ultimately projects that more often than not are not needed at all and prove to be an economic drain on the already poor and struggling country. Thus many countries end up paying back long term loans to the World Bank for projects that ultimately do more harm than good for a country.

Most thinking people of all the parties understand this, but the dictator often has a well- paid military, political supporters, and transnational corporate sponsors; thus the citizenry of the country are stymied and held back in the most basic of ways.

Generally, it appears to me that embracing local community with a conscious focus on decentralization would be a positive step for both the people and the planet.

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