Localism in Good and Hard Times
Contribution to GTI Forum Think Globally, Act Locally?

Frank Fischer

Localism, in my view, is not about giving priority to the local. The issue is rather about the need to bring it more fully back into the fold. Localism was from the outset basic to the environmental movement, with writers such as Murray Bookchin, Kirkpatrick Sale, and Rudolf Bahro advocating regionalism, communes, and ecovillages. This orientation was seen as anything but a retreat from wider social and environmental struggles. Bookchin, for example, saw it as a way to begin taking back power from the unsustainable center. His confederal/libertarian municipalism, as Brian Tokar underscores, was put forward as a strategy to “challenge parochialism, encourage interdependence, and build a genuine counterpower to dominant institutions” from where “the growth imperative of capitalism” could be radically challenged.

Similarly, Bahro, who established and lived in an ecovillage, was a founder of the German Green Party, which came to have a long reach beyond the local level. A tireless opponent of the global capitalist “megamachine,” he saw the eco-commune as the “germ-cell” of a new social form that could eventually replace the existing bureaucratic state.

Reasserting the Local

As environmentalism shifted the struggle—necessarily—to global environmental politics, localism took a back seat in environmental thinking. As the crisis is global, so the argument goes, the solutions have to be global. Although the local dimension didn’t disappear altogether, it lost its luster as attention turned to the global stage. Only later, when the failures of national and global efforts started to become apparent, did a growing number of people start to think...
seriously again about the local. The emphasis turned mainly to the role of cities as the front line of climate crisis, especially to mitigate the consequences.

We all live locally, whether in urban or rural localities. Our local home thus needs to be an essential part of the larger ecological system. While there is a growing literature that rediscovers the importance of the local level, much of it unfortunately conceptualizes the local as a subsystem of the global system. This is not entirely wrong, but it fails to recognize that the local is more than just a delivery system for programs from above. It has a life of its own, a dynamic independent of the global system.

Localism, to be sure, has a long history, having been advocated in our time by ecologists such as E. F. Schumacher, Wendell Berry, and Bookchin. Such writers have emphasized the many promises associated with localism—sense of place, community, conviviality, local culture, identity, local production, food networks, self-sufficiency, local political control, face-to-face discussions, participatory democracy, and more. It is also an important site for environmental action and implementation of sustainability. An emphasis on local communities and the role of their activists has always been an essential part of the theory of sustainable development, even if it has all-too-often only received lip service.

But these are promises with no guarantees. Developing a viable form of localism does not just happen because it is local. Local communities can be narrow-minded, provincial, socially oppressive, unjust, corrupt, and undemocratic. In this regard, the politics of relocalization can be understood as a variant of the general struggle for political and environmental change. Realizing the promises depends on particular conditions, commitments, and hard work on the part of citizens and activists.

**Localism beyond the Dichotomy**

The argument that localization walks away from global environmental politics is, in my experience, wrong. While there are always exceptions, localists, especially those following in the aforementioned traditions, broadly recognize the need for global action. Most local thinkers and activists do not see this as an either/or. We all are situated somewhere locally, as he points out, and this position is an important source of initiative and action. As the Transition Town and
ecovillage movements have shown, local action is flexible. Local places are where people can get personally involved with their neighbors and, as Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition movement, put it, roll up their sleeves and start “doing stuff.” In the process, they often become activated, even sometimes radicalized. Part of that engagement is learning to understand the connections between local and the global spaces. Helping climate refugees find local shelter easily leads to active concerns about global warming. Such involvement, moreover, works to counter the fact that the average citizen sees the global as distant, something to read about in the newspaper, something for international elites and experts to deal with.

Localism for Hard Times

There is yet another dimension to the relocalization movement that is overlooked. I think it is unlikely in the time available that we will be able to avoid major disasters, if not outright collapse. The “Great Unraveling” is a topic that many are reluctant to talk about, comfortably situated academics in particular. People prefer to emphasize the positive rather than the negative, which one can understand. But, in my view, it is time to look the probable disasters of the crisis in the face. Confronting a downward spiral, large numbers of people will need ideas and practical knowledge about how to deal with the desperate circumstances in which they find themselves. The need to act will then overshadow theoretical discussions about global transition. Localism in its various forms, especially the ecovillage movement, speaks very directly to this need for viable alternatives.

History shows that people faced with the consequences of crisis at the center seek to escape by returning to the land, both to flee social and political turmoil and to feed themselves. In the future, just as in the past, growing numbers of people will be forced to leave unlivable cities and head for the land. For many, this will be more a matter of hard necessity than a question of choice. Desperate people will be in a search of ways to cope with the hardships that will come with climate disasters, if not simply to survive. Today we can see signs of such movement in European countries such as Greece which have confronted extremely severe financial hardships and high levels of unemployment. The phenomenon is also evident in wide parts of Eastern Europe still struggling to deal with post-Soviet transition.
Many find it advantageous to move back to the land with their families and friends, where they can cooperatively grow their own food, in many cases to achieve a basic level of subsistence. Most urban dwellers, in the advanced industrial world in any case, know little or nothing about living on the land, including the knowledge necessary to grow their own food. But hungry people will learn, even if not overnight. This is where a range of alternative forms of living can be significant, in particular those organized around sustainable farming and the communal life of the ecovillage. We find here people who have already been experimenting with new and old ways to do things, similar to what Hopkins has referred to as the “Great Reskilling.” They have developed a wealth of local knowledge that is readily transferable to people confronting climate-related hardships. This includes practical knowledge about living well with less material stuff, but also a large amount of social knowledge about communal living, collective learning, sharing income, and making decisions by participatory democracy, none of which are easy under any circumstances. The members of ecovillages are fully aware of what is ahead and the need to provide useful information to hard pressed people, a concern they discuss quite often. They understand themselves as developing knowledge that can be passed along as lessons to those looking for new ways to organize their lives, especially people fleeing climate disasters.

For me, this is one of the places where progressive theorizing meets concrete practical action. It was for this reason that I previously suggested that we pay more attention to these critically important experiments in localism. This does mean that these activities are a substitute for global struggle. The goal is rather to build stronger connections between the local and the global. A sustainable transition needs both efforts. Chella Rajan is right when he argues that people-environment interactions require conjoined actions between both levels of governance. This means that an effective strategy, as Helena Norberg-Hodge puts it, has to be both bottom-up and top-down at the same time.
About the Author

Frank Fischer is a research scholar at both the Institute of Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam and Humboldt University in Berlin, as well as an Emeritus Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at Rutgers University. His research focuses on environmental policy and public policy; American politics, including US foreign policy; public policy analysis; politics of climate change; scientific expertise and democratic governance; and US foreign policy. He is a co-editor of the journal Critical Policy Studies and the author of such books as Evaluating Public Policy; Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge; Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities; and the forthcoming Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy. Fischer received his PhD from New York University.

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