

The new politics of community.

by Wendell Berry

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The two political parties of the future are likely to consist of two opposing factions: those who seek to destroy community and those who seek to protect it.

Community is a concept, like humanity or peace, that virtually no one takes the trouble to quarrel with; even its worst enemies praise it. There is almost no product or project that is not being advocated in the name of community improvement. We are told that we, as a community, are better off for the power industry, the defence industry, the communications industry, the transportation industry, the agriculture industry, the food industry, the health industry, the medical industry, the insurance industry, the sports industry, the beauty industry, the entertainment industry, the mining industry, the education industry, the law industry, the government industry and the religion industry. You could look into any one of these industries and find many people, some of them in influential positions, who are certifiably "community spirited".

In fact, however, neither our economy, nor our government, nor our educational system runs on the assumption that community has a value - a value, that is, which counts in any practical or powerful way. The values that are assigned to community are emotional and spiritual - "cultural" - which makes it the subject of pieties that are merely vocal. But does community have a value that is practical or economic? Is community necessary? Can "community values" be preserved simply for their own sake? Can people be neighbours, for example, if they do not need each other or help each other? Can there be a harvest festival where there is no harvest? Does economy have spiritual value?

In helping us to confront, understand, and oppose the principles of the global economy, the old political alignments have become virtually useless. Communists and capitalists are alike in their contempt for country people, country life and country places. They have exploited the countryside with equal greed and disregard. They are alike even in their plea that it is right to damage the present in order to make "a better future".

Moreover, the old opposition of country and city, which was never useful, is now more useless than ever. It is, in fact, damaging to everybody involved, as is the opposition of producers and consumers. These are not differences but divisions that ought not to exist because they are to a considerable extent artificial. The so-called urban economy has been just as hard on urban communities as it has

been on rural ones.

All these conventional affiliations are now meaningless, useful only to those in a position to profit from public bewilderment. A new political scheme of opposed parties, however, is beginning to take form. This is essentially a two-party system, and it divides over the fundamental issue of community. One of these parties holds that community has no value; the other holds that it does. One is the party of the global economy; the other I would call simply the party of local community. The global party is large, though not populous, immensely powerful and wealthy, self-aware, purposeful and tightly organised. The community party is only now becoming aware of itself; it is widely scattered, highly diverse, small though potentially numerous, weak though latently powerful, and poor though by no means without resources.

We know pretty well the makeup of the party of the global economy, but who are the members of the party of local community? They are people who take a generous and neighbourly view of self-preservation; they do not believe that they can survive and flourish by the rule of dog eat dog; they do not believe that they can succeed by defeating or destroying or selling or using up everything but themselves. They doubt that good solutions can be produced by violence. They want to preserve the precious things of nature and of human culture and pass them on to their children. They want the world's fields and forests to be productive; they do not want them to be destroyed for the sake of production. They know you cannot be a democrat (small d) or a conservationist and at the same time a proponent of the supranational corporate economy. They believe - they know from their experience - that the neighbourhood, the local community, is the proper place and frame of reference for responsible work. They see that no commonwealth or community of interest can be defined by greed. They know that things connect - that farming, for example, is connected to nature, and food to farming, and health to food - and they want to preserve the connections. They know that a healthy local community cannot be replaced by a market or an entertainment industry or an information highway. They know that, contrary to all the unmeaning and unmeant political talk about "job creation", work ought not to be merely a bone thrown to the otherwise unemployed. They know that work ought to be necessary; it ought to be good; it ought to be satisfying and dignifying to the people who do it, and genuinely useful and pleasing to the people for whom it is done.

The party of local community, then, is a real party with a real platform and an agenda of real and doable work. And it has, we might add, a respectable history in the hundreds

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of efforts, over several decades, to preserve local nature or local health or to sell local products to local consumers. Now such efforts appear to be coming into their own, attracting interest and energy in a way they have not done before. People are seeing more clearly all the time the connections between conservation and economics. They are seeing that a community's health is largely determined by the way it makes its living.

The natural membership of the community party consists of small farmers, ranchers and market gardeners, worded consumers, owners and employees of small shops, stores, community banks, and other small businesses, self-employed people, religious people, and conservationists. The aims of this party really are only two: the preservation of ecological diversity and integrity, and the renewal, on sound cultural and ecological principles, of local economies and local communities.

So now we must ask how a sustainable local community (which is to say, a sustainable local economy) might function. I am going to suggest a set of rules that I think such a community would have to follow. And I hasten to say that I do not consider these rules to be predictions; I am not interested in foretelling the future. If these rules have any validity, that is because they apply now.

If the members of a local community want their community to cohere, to flourish, and to last, these are some things they would do:

1. Always ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?
2. Always include local nature - the land, the water, the air, the native creatures - within the membership of the community
3. Always ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbours.
4. Always supply local needs first. (And only then think of exporting their products, first to nearby cities, and then to others.)
5. Understand the unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of "labour saving" if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any kind of pollution or contamination.
6. Develop properly scaled value-adding industries for local products to ensure that the community does not become merely a colony of the national or global economy.

7. Develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm and/or forest economy.
8. Strive to produce as much of the community's own energy as possible.
9. Strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community and decrease expenditures outside the community.
10. Make sure that money paid into the local economy circulates within the community for as long as possible before it is paid out.
11. Make the community able to invest in itself by maintaining its properties, keeping itself clean (without dirtying some other place), caring for its old people, teaching its children.
12. See that the old and the young take care of one another. The young must learn from the old, not necessarily and not always in school. There must be no institutionalised "child care" and "homes for the aged". The community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.
13. Account for costs now conventionally hidden or "externalised". Whenever possible, these costs must be debited against monetary income.
14. Look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programmes, systems of barter, and the like.
15. Always be aware of the economic value of neighbourly acts. In our time the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighbourhood, leaving people to face their calamities alone.
16. A rural community should always be acquainted with, and complexly connected with, community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.
17. A sustainable rural economy will be dependent on urban consumers loyal to local products. Therefore, we are talking about an economy that will always be more co-operative than competitive.

These rules are derived from Western political and religious traditions, from the promptings of ecologists and certain agriculturists, and from common sense. They may seem radical, but only because the modern national and global economies have been formed in almost perfect disregard of community and ecological interests. A community economy is not an economy in which

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well-placed persons can make a "killing". It is not a killer economy. It is an economy whose aim is generosity and a well-distributed and safeguarded abundance. If it seems unusual to hope and work for such an economy, then we must remember that a willingness to put the community ahead of profit is hardly unprecedented among community business people and local banks.

How might we begin to build a decentralised system of durable local economies? Gradually, I hope. We have had enough of violent or sudden changes imposed by predatory interests outside our communities. In many places, the obvious way to begin the work I am talking about is with the development of a local food economy. Such a start is attractive because it does not have to be big or costly, it requires nobody's permission, and it can ultimately involve everybody. It does not require us to beg for mercy from our exploiters or to look for help where consistently we have failed to find it. By "local food economy" I mean simply an economy in which local consumers buy as much of their food as possible from local producers and in which local producers produce as much as they can for the local market.

Several conditions now favour the growth of local food economies. On the one hand, the costs associated with our present highly centralised food system are going to increase. Growers in the Central Valley of California, for example, can no longer depend on an unlimited supply of cheap water for irrigation. Transportation costs can only go up. Biotechnology, variety patenting and other agribusiness innovations are intended not to help farmers or consumers but to extend and prolong corporate control of the food economy; they will increase the cost of food, both economically and ecologically.

On the other hand, consumers are increasingly worried about the quality and purity of their food, and so they would like to buy from responsible growers close to home. They would like to know where their food comes from and how it is produced. They are increasingly aware that the larger and more centralised the food economy becomes, the more vulnerable it will be to natural or economic catastrophe, to political or military disruption, and to bad agricultural practice.

For all these reasons, and others, we need urgently to develop local food economies wherever they are possible. Local food economies would improve the quality of food. They would increase consumer influence over production; consumers would become participatory members in their own food economy. They would help to ensure a sustainable, dependable supply of food. By reducing some of the costs associated with long supply lines and large corporate suppliers (such as packaging, transportation and

advertising), they would reduce the cost of food at the same time that they would increase income to growers. They would tend to improve farming practices and increase employment in agriculture. They would tend to reduce the size of farms and increase the number of owners.

Of course, no food economy can be, or ought to be, only local. But the orientation of agriculture to local needs, local possibilities, and local limits is indispensable to the health of both land and people, and undoubtedly to the health of democratic liberties as well.

For many of the same reasons, we need also to develop local forest economies, of which the aim would be the survival and enduring good health of both our forests and their dependent local communities. We need to preserve the native diversity of our forests as we use them. As in agriculture, we need local, small-scale, non-polluting industries (sawmills, woodworking shops, and so on) to add value to local forest products, as well as local supporting industries for the local forest economy.

As support for sustainable agriculture should come most logically from consumers who consciously wish to keep eating, so support for sustainable forestry might logically come from loggers, mill workers, and other employees of the forest economy who consciously wish to keep working. But many people have a direct interest in the good use of our forests: farmers and ranchers with woodlots, the makers of wood products, conservationists, and others.

What we have before us, if we want our communities to survive, is the building of an adversary economy, a system of local or community economies within and to protect against, the would-be global economy. To do this, we must somehow learn to reverse the flow of the siphon that has for so long been drawing resources, money, talent and people out of our countryside with very little if any return, and often with a return only of pollution, impoverishment and ruin. We must figure out new ways to fund, at affordable rates, the development of healthy local economies. We must find ways to suggest economically - for finally no other suggestion will be effective - that the work, the talents and the interest of our young people are needed at home.

Our whole society has much to gain from the development of local land-based economies. They would carry us far toward the ecological and cultural ideal of local adaptation. They would encourage the formation of adequate local cultures (and this would be authentic multiculturalism). They would introduce into agriculture and forestry a sort of spontaneous and natural quality control, for neither consumers nor workers would want to see the local

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economy destroy itself by abusing or exhausting its sources. And they would complete at last the task of freedom from colonial economics begun by our ancestors more than 200 years ago.

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