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**BY GAR ALPEROVITZ • ILLUSTRATIONS BY WESLEY BEDROSIAN**

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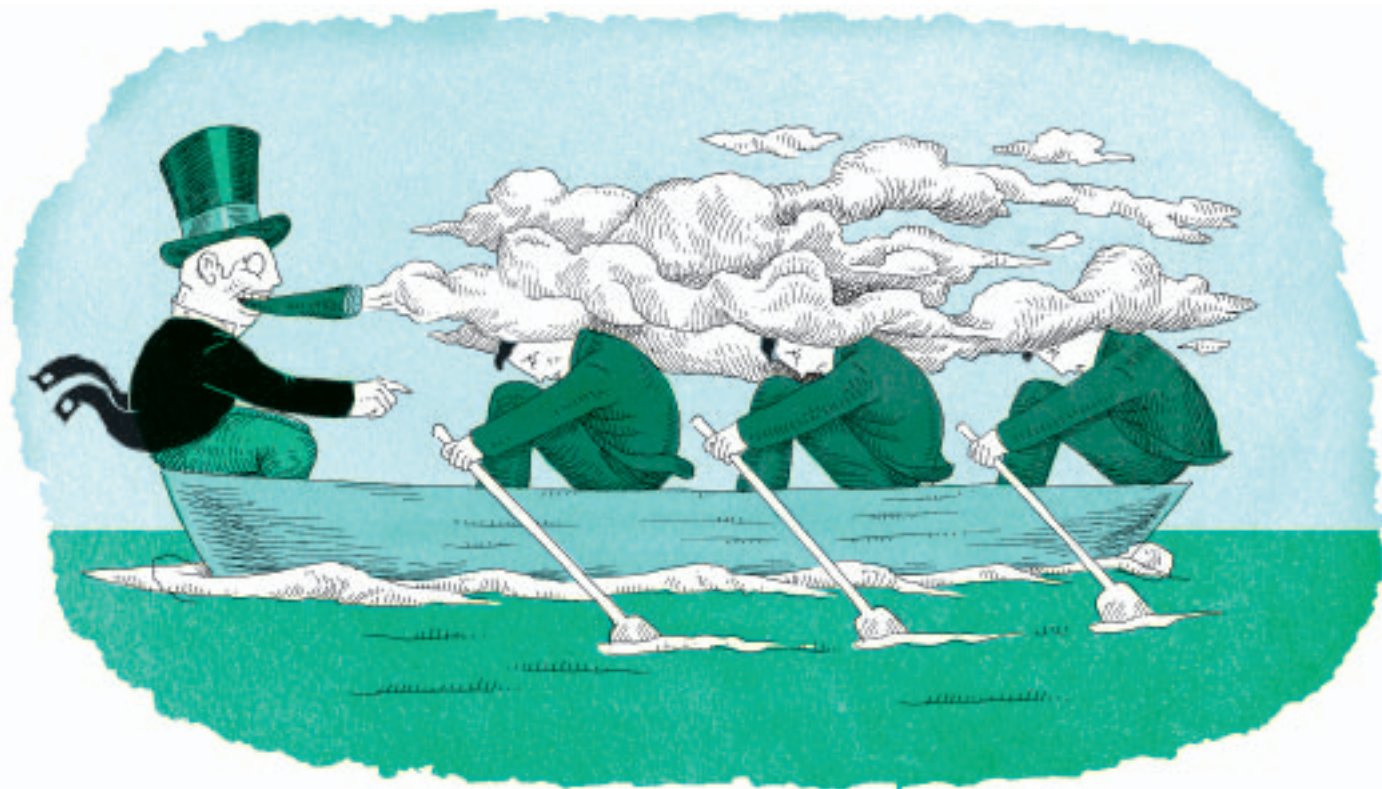


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# You Say You Want a Revolution?

Emerging economic strategies may hold the key to broadening democracy and enhancing environmental protection at the same time.

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Since the modern environmental movement was born in the 1970s, enormous funds and energies have been expended globally to understand and cure our environmental ills. The result has been some spectacular successes—the Montreal Protocol to control chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) emissions and preserve the stratospheric ozone layer usually springs to mind—as well as growing understanding of the Earth’s ecosystems and our effects on them, and a widely expressed commitment (at least on paper) to their health. In most countries, nearly everyone says he or she is an environmentalist.

So why don’t the trends look better? Consider a few examples from *Vital Signs*, Worldwatch’s periodic look at environmental indices. Nearly one in four mammal species is in serious decline. The Earth’s ice cover is melting as global average surface temperatures continue to rise, due in major part to the largely unrestrained burning of fossil fuels. Half of the

world’s wetlands, key ecosystems that protect enormous numbers of species and provide critical ecological services, have disappeared since 1900 to pollution and development. During the 1990s, the planet lost 9.4 million hectares of forest every year—an area about as large as Portugal. In general, despite more than 30 years of modern achievement—and well before the Bush era—many of the most important environmental trends have been moving steadily in the wrong direction.

There are three types of progress on the environment. First are absolute “breakthroughs” in connection with discrete problems, such as the near-total elimination of DDT and lead. These are important but limited in number and overall impact. The second type includes a range of policies, programs, and regulatory efforts which serve to “do something about” a critical environmental problem but only retard, rather than reverse, a major trend. Thus the U.S. wetland-loss rate has slowed, yet losses in the 1990s continued at over

20,000 hectares a year. Likewise, in the United States gains were made for awhile in average passenger car fuel mileage, but these were overwhelmed by a rise in the number of cars, a shift to less efficient light trucks and SUVs, and an increase in miles driven.

The third type of achievement actually reverses the direction of a destructive long-term trend. Examples include the Montreal Protocol mentioned above (which, despite a post-ban black market in CFCs, has vastly reduced their release into the atmosphere), certain air- and water-pollution reductions, and the clean-up of Lake Erie.

Unfortunately, even before the Bush Administration's destructive policies, most environmental gains were in the second category: they did very useful things, but the positive achievements were not sufficient to reverse long-term negative trends. And that's clearly not good enough.

How do we get ourselves unstuck? Any strategic effort to get at and ultimately reverse these trends must begin by confronting the implications of an obvious truth: whatever people's true feelings about the environment, they will understandably choose jobs over the environment when the two appear to conflict. Air and water pollution, for example, is commonly difficult to deal with at the local level because citizens and political leaders fear the loss of jobs that a challenge to corporate polluters might produce, even when the threat is severe. The citizens of Pigeon River, Tennessee, for instance, chose a few years ago to tolerate potentially carcinogenic emissions by North Carolina's Champion International paper mill because of fear they might otherwise lose 1,000 jobs. A 51-year-old worker who supported keeping the plant open despite the danger spoke for many: "What do you do when you're my age and faced with the prospect of being thrown out on the street?"

If we are unable to solve the jobs problem, there will be continued political opposition to important environmental measures that might cause economic dislocation. On the other hand, to the degree communities can be assured of economic stability, their ability to deal with environmental problems can clearly be greatly enhanced.

## A Thousand Blooms

To accomplish this, however, would require the environmental movement to develop a much broader strategic approach and, with it, new allies. Is this possible? And not simply with labor unions, but with a range of other key groups in local communities?

There are hopeful signs. Environmentalists have demonstrated a capacity both to expand the agenda and to create new allies in some areas in recent years. In connection with sprawl, for instance, for many years the primary emphasis was on policies to constrain growth. However, many now realize that the outward-moving pressures that contribute to sprawl are often the result of economic development failures in the central city. Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution puts it this

way: The "flip side of the rise in concentrated urban poverty is the surge in suburban and exurban sprawl."

In response, a number of groups have added community economic strategies to their once narrowly environmental agendas, and in doing so have found new allies. For instance, Miami's "Eastward Ho! Brownfields Partnership"—a collaboration of government agencies, community organizations, and private groups working to redirect development in south-east Florida—is working hard to promote "infill" development to revitalize Miami's urban core and other coastal communities and thereby reduce development pressures on the Everglades. Maryland's Smart Growth & Neighborhood Conservation Initiative follows the same political-economic logic.

A larger, longer-term strategy would build on such ideas and organize broad coalitions around specific policies and new economic institutions aimed at community economic and environmental security. And although national political action, at least in the United States, is stymied in many areas at present, there are growing possibilities—and indications of a potentially major shift—at the state and local levels.

Just below the radar of media attention there has been a quiet explosion of new state and local policies aimed at retaining jobs, building greater local self-reliance, and increasing local economic "multipliers" so that money spent in a community recirculates to produce additional jobs. For example:

- ▶ U.S. state governments now regularly shape public procurement to boost local economies. Community-based small businesses, for instance, can receive a five-percent preference on bids for state contracts in California, New Mexico, and Alaska.
- ▶ Many cities (roughly half the municipalities in a recent survey) use public contracts to help neighborhood-anchored community development corporations (CDCs) and simultaneously improve the delivery of government services.
- ▶ Publicly sponsored "buy local" programs are widespread. The Rural Local Markets Demonstration in central North Carolina identifies products, services, parts, and raw materials that manufacturers would like to purchase locally, and then assists other local firms with the development of such products and/or helps establish new local firms to fill the supply gap.
- ▶ Pension funds now regularly seek ways to enhance local economic health. More than half of U.S. states have established Economically Targeted Investment programs to promote investments that help communities.

Perhaps even more importantly, an extraordinary range of new economic institutions that both anchor jobs and change the nature of wealth ownership are also at the threshold of potentially explosive strategic expansion. For example, roughly 11,000 substantially or wholly employee-owned businesses are now operating around the country. More people are involved in these firms than are members of unions in the private sector. Not only is the record of such companies impressive, their capacity to anchor jobs is of extreme importance to

community stability; few companies owned by local employees ever get up and move to Mexico! Moreover, many worker-owned firms are also on the cutting edge of environmental sustainability efforts. Cranston Print Works in Rhode Island, for instance, has regularly won awards for reducing its use of toxics. The office furniture and services firm Herman Miller, Inc. has been recognized by the National Wildlife Federation and the state of California for outstanding reductions in material waste. Kolbe and Kolbe, which makes windows and doors, has dramatically reduced its hazardous waste output as a result of suggestions by employee-owners.

Worker-owned firms are not the only emerging institutional form that can help stabilize local economies and change

feet of methane daily. In turn, the sale of gas for power production helps produce over 40,000 megawatthours of electricity per year and generates revenues for the city. Similar recovery efforts can be found in all parts of the country. Among the many other innovative and successful methane recovery operations are those run by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, the South Carolina Energy Office, Los Angeles County, and the city of Portland, Oregon.

## Local Services Rule

A few examples don't make a movement. But recent research suggests that the policy and institutional experience necessary to mount a much larger and longer-term national effort



who owns and benefits from wealth. For instance, there are now roughly 4,000 neighborhood-based community development corporations actively at work in all parts the United States (by some estimates, 6,000). More than 115 million Americans are members of cooperatives. Hundreds of new land trusts are now operating in diverse communities. Numerous municipalities, under both Democratic and Republican mayors, have established little-noticed but important publicly owned city enterprises.

When there is determination and clarity of vision, these institutions can resolve the apparent conflict between community job creation and ecological sustainability. Many municipalities, for instance, create jobs and generate revenues through land fill gas recovery business enterprises that turn the greenhouse gas methane (a byproduct of waste disposal) into energy. Riverview, Michigan, now recovers more than 4 million cubic

feet of methane daily. In turn, the sale of gas for power production helps produce over 40,000 megawatthours of electricity per year and generates revenues for the city. Similar recovery efforts can be found in all parts of the country. Among the many other innovative and successful methane recovery operations are those run by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, the South Carolina Energy Office, Los Angeles County, and the city of Portland, Oregon.

focused on community economic and environmental security is developing fast. There are also important sectoral changes under way that, over time, could elevate such an effort from marginal to strategic, above all the decline of manufacturing. In 1950 fully 31 percent of the U.S. non-farm work force was involved in manufacturing. Twenty years later such employment had slipped to 25 percent, and by 1990 it was 16 percent. Currently those working in the manufacturing sector number only a little over 11 percent of the labor force, and this figure is projected to decline further. The fact is that the U.S. economy has for many years been dominated by services—a sector that is far more locally oriented, more stable, and less dependent on (or sensitive to) the vagaries of global trade than manufacturing. (Only 5–7 percent of U.S. services are exported.) Though rarely noted in the overwhelming media

focus on manufacturing, these ongoing sectoral changes favor more stable, locally oriented economic development. The work of economist Thomas Power, in fact, suggests that “about 60 percent of U.S. economic activity is local and provides residents with the goods and services that make their lives comfortable. This includes retail activities; personal, repair, medical, educational, and professional services; construction; public utilities; local transportation; financial institutions; real estate; and government services. Thus almost all local economies are dominated by residents taking in each other’s wash.”

Locally oriented economic activity increased from 42 percent in 1940 to 52 percent of total community economic activity in 1980. Over the period from 1969 to 1992, Power notes, “the aggregates of retail and wholesale sales, services, financial and real estate, and state and local government” have been making up “a larger and larger percentage of total earnings, rising from 52 to 60 percent...” As economist Paul Krugman puts it, “Although we talk a lot these days about globalization, about a world grown small, when you look at the economies of modern cities what you see is a process of localization: a steadily rising share of the work force produces services that are sold only within that same metropolitan area.”

In short, a determined effort to make local economic and environmental security a strategic priority would be working with, not against, the grain of ongoing sectoral change. A long-term initiative aimed at building up state and local alliances might accordingly hope to create the political and experiential basis of a national capacity to undercut the job fears that weaken local environmental efforts.

Far more is at stake, however, than local economics, or even environmental policies. Any serious attempt to deal with the longer-term sources of our difficulties will ultimately have to come to grips with questions of democracy, on the one hand, and a more environmentally supportive culture, on the other. Although almost everyone gives lip service to such abstractions, the real question is whether it is possible to begin taking them seriously as a matter of policy and strategic commitment.

## democracy and Democracy

This brings us to the demanding implications of *really* “Thinking Globally and Acting Locally.” In recent years several theorists have focused attention on the first of these implications: what it takes to truly nurture democracy. In his widely discussed book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam probed well beneath surface indicators of democratic engagement, such as the fall-off in voting, to focus on the decline in local citizen associations, networks, formal and informal clubs, neighborhood groups, unions, and the like. He suggested that this decline, in turn, had weakened the foundational requirements of democracy in general. What is not at the center of this analysis are national political parties, national interest groups, national lobbying, national campaign finance laws, or national political phenomena. Impor-

tant as these are, what Putnam and others have increasingly stressed is the micro-level of citizen groups and citizen involvement. Here is the place to begin to look for democratic renewal in general. If you can’t have Democracy without democracy, then a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of rebuilding the former is to get to work locally.

It’s an old lesson, putting into modern form Tocqueville’s contention that in “democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge...” John Stuart Mill, another 19th century theorist, likewise held that direct experience with local governance was essential to “the peculiar training of a citizen, the practical part of the political education of a free people. ... [W]e do not learn to read or write, to ride or swim, by being merely told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale, that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger.”

The critical question, of course, is what are the real-world conditions required to make this meaningful? Citizens’ participation in local community efforts is all but impossible if the economic rug is regularly pulled out from under them. Indeed, what precisely is the “community” when “citizens” are forced to move in and out of a locality because of volatile economic conditions? And who has any real stake in long-term decisions?

Real community democracy requires real community economic health and the kinds of institutions which can sustain it. Any serious longer-term community economic and ecological security effort, accordingly, must take seriously what it will require to rebuild the local basis of democracy.

It should be obvious where this is leading: economic instability radically weakens all forms of civil society network-building, including those that nurture democracy and communities’ interests in their environments. Conversely, strategies that help achieve local stability produce, at the same time, a more supportive context for democracy-building civil society associations in general, and for citizen organizations concerned with the environment in particular.

Moreover, these local strategies have ripple effects in both time and space. Research by Giovanna Di Chiro has demonstrated how the agendas of grassroots groups commonly evolve from defending a localized “place” orientation to supporting broader, more universal concepts of environmental justice. Raymond DeYoung, Stefan Vogel, and Stephen Kaplan have examined the diverse ways that direct local participation builds stronger environmentally oriented attitudes in general. The resulting changes in consciousness—and in “acceptable” standards and norms of environmental management—are critical, in turn, to producing support for broader, longer-term national policy change.

## Prospects

I believe that we are quietly approaching a time when there may be a realistic chance of systematically laying the structural foundations at the state and local level for a long-term strat-

egy aimed not only at undercutting the economic instability which weakens efforts to control pollution, but of attempting to nourish the basis of a re-energized democratic and ecologically healthy culture.

I concede that the idea of building a new long-term agenda is daunting, especially given the difficulties of the Bush era. On the other hand, other historical periods of great difficulty have often given way to positive change, often in significant part because individuals have been forced to reassess and develop new strategies.

Years ago I was legislative director for the late Senator Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day. Nelson had been a “conservation governor.” When he was first elected to the U.S.

Goldwater debacle of 1964. The ideas and politics that currently dominate American reality were once regarded as antique and ridiculous by the mainstream press, by national political leadership, and by most serious academic thinkers. Committed conservatives worked in very difficult circumstances to develop their ideas, practices, and politics for the long haul. And though I disagree with them, they demonstrate what can be done against seemingly long odds when people get serious.

All of this underscores a more fundamental point: to suggest the realistic possibility of developing new long-term alliances around a community economic and ecological security agenda opens the door to embracing a larger over-



Senate, the idea that environmental issues might one day become important in America seemed far-fetched. Indeed, everyone knew this was a non-starter. Over only a very few short years, however, what seemed impossible became an extraordinary movement.

In the pre-1960s South, the idea that the odds against change were too high was also widespread—and here the odds were enforced not simply by reactionary politicians but by deadly terror. Blacks, and even some white Americans, were murdered for demanding their basic rights. To many in the South in the 1930s and 1940s the possibility of change seemed far more distant than it does to today’s environmental movement. And yet those working against the odds ultimately laid the foundation for an extraordinary explosion of positive change.

Most people also tend to forget how marginal conservative thinkers and activists were in the 1950s, even before the

arching vision of comprehensive, indeed systemic change—one that can help satisfy goals of democracy and community writ large. It is not simply, therefore, a matter of policies and alliances, though both are necessary. The only way ultimately to achieve the motivation and committed energy needed for major change is to offer a morally compelling realistic vision that goes beyond ecological issues to the question of democracy itself.

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