



## Wendell Berry

### Conserving Communities

IN OCTOBER OF 1993, the New York Times announced that the United States Census Bureau would "no longer count the number of Americans who live on farms." In explaining the decision, the Times provided some figures as troubling as they were unsurprising. Between 1910 and 1920, we had 32 million farmers living on farms-about a third of our population. By 1950, this population had declined, but our farm population was still 23 million. By 1991, the number was only 4.6 million, less than 2 percent of the national population. That is, our farm population had declined by an average of almost half a million people a year for forty-one years. Also, by 1991, 32 percent of our farm managers and 86 percent of our farmworkers did not live on the land they farmed.

These figures describe a catastrophe that is now virtually complete. They announce that we no longer have an agricultural class that is, or that can require itself to be, recognized by the government; we no longer have a "farm vote" that is going to be of much concern to politicians. American farmers, who over the years have wondered whether or not they counted, may now put their minds at rest: they do not count. They have become statistically insignificant.

We must not fail to appreciate that this statistical insignificance of farmers is the successful outcome of a national purpose and a national program. It is the result of great effort and of principles rigorously applied. It has been achieved with the help of expensive advice from university and government experts, by the tireless agitation and exertion of the agribusiness corporations, and by the renowned advantages of competition-of our farmers among themselves and with farmers of other countries. As a result, millions of country people have been liberated from farming, landownership, self-employment, and other idiocies of rural life.

But what has happened to our agricultural communities is not exceptional any more than it is accidental. This is simply the way a large, exploitive, absentee economy works. For example, here is a New York Times News Service report on "rape-and-run" logging in Montana:

Throughout the 1980s, the Champion International Corp. went on a tree-cutting binge in Montana, leveling entire forests at a rate that had not been seen since the cut-and-run logging days of the last century. Now the hangover has arrived. After liquidating much of its valuable timber in the Big Sky country, Champion is quitting Montana, leaving behind hundreds of unemployed mill workers, towns staggered by despair and more than 1,000 square miles of heavily logged land.

The article goes on to speak of the revival of "a century old complaint about large, distant corporations exploiting Montana for its natural resources and then leaving after the land is exhausted." And it quotes a Champion spokesman, Tucker Hill, who said, "We are very sympathetic to those people and very sad. But I don't think you can hold a company's feet to the fire for everything they did over the last twenty years."

If you doubt that exhaustion is the calculated result of such economic enterprise, you might consider the example of the mountain counties of eastern Kentucky from which, over the last three-quarters of a century enormous wealth has been extracted by the coal companies, leaving the land wrecked and the people poor.

The same kind of thing is now happening in banking. In the county next to mine an independent local bank was recently taken over by a large out-of-state bank. Suddenly some of the local farmers and small business people, who had been borrowing money from that bank for twenty years and whose credit records were good, were refused credit because they did not meet the requirements of a computer in a distant city. Old and once-valued customers now find that they are known by category rather than character. The directors and officers of the large bank clearly have reduced their economic thinking to one very simple question: "Would we rather make one big loan or many small ones?" Or to put it only a little differently: "Would we rather support one large enterprise or many small ones?" And they have chosen the large over the small.

This economic prejudice against the small has, of course, done immense damage for a long time to small or family sized businesses in city and country alike. But that prejudice has often overlapped with an industrial prejudice against anything rural and against the land itself, and this prejudice has resulted in damages that are not only extensive but also longlasting or permanent.

As we all know, we have much to answer for in our use of this continent from the beginning, but in the last half-century we have added to our desecrations of nature a deliberate destruction of our rural communities. The statistics I cited at the beginning are incontrovertible evidence of this. But so is the condition of our farms and forests and rural towns. If you have eyes to see, you can see that there is a limit beyond which machines and chemicals cannot replace people; there is a limit beyond which mechanical or economic efficiency cannot replace care.

I am talking here about the common experience, the common fate, of rural communities in our country for a long time. It has also been, and it will increasingly be, the common fate of rural communities in other countries. The message is plain enough, and we have ignored it for too long: the great, centralized economic entities of our time do not come into rural places in order to improve them by "creating jobs." They come to take as much of value as they can take, as cheaply and as quickly as they can take it. They are interested in "job creation" only so long as the jobs can be done more cheaply by humans than by machines. They are not interested in the good health-economic or natural or human-of any place on this earth. And if you should undertake to appeal or complain to one of these great corporations on behalf of your community, you would discover something most remarkable: you would find that these organizations are organized expressly for the evasion of responsibility. They are structures in which, as my brother says, "the buck never stops." The buck is processed up the hierarchy until finally it is passed to "the shareholders," who characteristically are too widely dispersed, too poorly informed, and too unconcerned to be responsible for anything. The ideal of the modern corporation is to be (in terms of its own advantage) anywhere and (in terms of local accountability) nowhere. The message to country people, in other words, is this: Don't expect favors from your enemies.

And that message has a corollary that is just as plain and just as much ignored: The governmental and educational institutions from which rural people should by right have received help have not helped. Rather than striving to preserve the rural communities and economies and an adequate rural population, these institutions have consistently aided, abetted, and justified the destruction of every part of rural life. They have eagerly served the superstition that all technological innovation is good. They have said repeatedly that the failure of farm families, rural businesses, and rural communities is merely the result of progress and efficiency and is good for everybody.

We are now pretty obviously facing the possibility of a world that the supranational corporations, and the governments and educational systems that serve them, will control entirely for their own enrichment-and, incidentally and inescapably, for the impoverishment of all the rest of us. This will be a world in which the cultures that preserve nature and rural life will simply be disallowed. It will be, as our experience already suggests, a postagricultural world. But as we now begin to see, you cannot have a postagricultural world that is not also postdemocratic, postreligious, postnatural-in other words, it will be posthuman, contrary to the best that we have meant by "humanity."

In their dealings with the countryside and its people, the promoters of the so-called global economy are following a set of principles that can be stated as follows. They believe that a farm or a forest is or ought to be the same as a factory; that care is only minimally necessary in the use of the land; that affection is not necessary at all; that for all practical purposes a machine is as good as a human; that the industrial standards of production, efficiency, and profitability are the only standards that are necessary; that the topsoil is lifeless and inert; that soil biology is safely replaceable by soil chemistry; that the nature or ecology of any given place is irrelevant to the use of it; that there is no value in human community or neighborhood; and that technological innovation will produce only benign results.

These people see nothing odd or difficult about unlimited economic growth or unlimited consumption in a limited world. They believe that knowledge is property and is power, and that it ought to be. They believe that education is job training. They think that the summit of human achievement is a high-paying job that involves no work. Their public boast is that they are making a society in which everybody will be a "winner"-but their private aim has been to reduce radically the number of people who, by the measure of our historical ideals, might be thought successful: the independent, the self-employed, the owners of small businesses <#> or small usable properties, those who work at home.

The argument for joining the new international trade agreements has been that there is going to be a one-world economy, and we must participate or be left behind-though, obviously, the existence of a one-world economy depends on the

willingness of all the world to join, The theory is that under the rule of international, supposedly free trade, products will naturally flow from the places where they can be best produced to the places where they are most needed. This theory assumes the long-term safety and sustainability of massive international transport, for which there are no guarantees, just as there are no guarantees that products will be produced in the best way or to the advantage of the workers who produce them or that they will reach or can be afforded by the people who need them.

There are other unanswered questions about the global economy, two of which are paramount: How can any nation or region justify the destruction of a local productive capacity for the sake of foreign trade? And how can people who have demonstrated their inability to run national economies without inflation, usury, unemployment, and ecological devastation now claim that they can do a better job in running a global economy? American agriculture has demonstrated by its own ruination that you cannot solve economic problems just by increasing scale and, moreover, that increasing scale is almost certain to cause other problems-ecological, social, and cultural.

We can't go on too much longer, maybe, without considering the likelihood that we humans are not intelligent enough to work on the scale to which we have been tempted by our technological abilities. Some such recognition is undoubtedly implicit in American conservatives' long-standing objection to a big central government. And so it has been odd to see many of these same conservatives pushing for the establishment of a supranational economy that would inevitably function as a government far bigger and more centralized than any dreamed of before. Long experience has made it clear-as we might say to the liberals-that to be free we must limit the size of government and we must have some sort of home rule. But it is just as clear-as we might say to the conservatives-that it is foolish to complain about big government if we do not do everything we can to support strong local communities and strong community economies.

But 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."

The dialogue of Democrats and Republicans or of liberals and conservatives is likewise useless to us. Neither party is interested in farmers or in farming or in the good care of the land or in the quality of food. Nor are they interested in taking the best care of our forests. The leaders of these parties are equally subservient to the supranational corporations. Of this the North American Free Trade Agreement and the new revisions to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade are proof.

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

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 organized. The community party is only now coming 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 neighborly 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 neighborhood, 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 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 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 marker gardeners, worried 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 neighbors. 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 "labor 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, nor necessarily and not always in school. There must be no institutionalized "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 "externalized." Whenever possible, these costs must be debited against monetary income. 14. Look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programs, systems of barter, and the like. 15. Always be aware of the economic value of neighborly acts. In our time the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, 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 cooperative 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 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 decentralized 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 favor the growth of local food economies. On the one hand, the costs associated with our present highly centralized 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 centralized 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, nonpolluting 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, all who depend on the good health of forested watersheds, 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 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 two hundred years ago.

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