



richardheinberg.com

MuseLetter #323 / August 2019 by Richard Heinberg

Dear faithful readers,

My essay this month was written in response to a piece by Brian Tokar on the subject of local-versus-global action. Great Transition Network, which invited these essays, also published contributions from Helena Norberg Hodge, David Bollier and others. You can read the whole discussion [here](#). Meanwhile, my book project is advancing by leaps and bounds. Thanks for your patience while we continue to explore publication options. I hope to have news to report on that soon!

*Best wishes,
Richard*

Two Arguments for Localism

Argument 1: Localism is inevitable.

Globalization was made possible by long-distance transport, communications, and capital flows. It fits with widespread assumptions about progress and economic growth leading to a better future. But there are good reasons to think that our current bout of globalization is actually a brief, fragile, and highly problematic phase of human history.

Societies seem to pass through a "[secular cycle](#)" in which they grow in size and interconnectedness, but then experience instability and decline, becoming more decentralized and isolated once again. This secular cycle mirrors the [adaptive cycle](#) discussed in ecological literature, wherein ecosystems pass through phases of exploitation (in which total biomass, energy capture, and species interconnectivity all grow), conservation (where biomass, interconnectivity, and energy capture reach a peak, but at the expense of system resilience), release (a fairly sudden loss of biomass, energy capture, and connectivity), and reorganization (in which pioneer species begin a recovery, opening the way for a new exploitation phase).

Our current global society appears to be in the conservation phase of its adaptive cycle: it is at a peak of scale and integration. If the cyclical behavior of past societies is repeated in ours, recent trends toward globalization and urbanization will reach natural limits and be reversed. The inflection point may not be far in the future. Factors potentially leading to a loss of connectivity are growing in number, including environmental degradation (climate change, biodiversity loss, widespread plastics and petrochemical pollution), resource

depletion (topsoil, fresh water, minerals), and over-reliance on debt to maintain economic growth.

Another factor that is likely to be decisive is energy supply. The integration and scaling of social systems have required enormous and expanding amounts of energy, and our current energy system is about [twenty-five times larger](#) than the global energy system that existed at the start of the industrial revolution.

This system is entirely unsustainable in terms of its sources (86 percent of current energy comes from depleting, climate-destabilizing fossil fuels) and therefore almost certainly in terms of its scale as well. While a one-to-one replacement of energy from fossil sources with energy from alternative sources may be theoretically possible, substitution is not happening at remotely the rate needed to avert serious environmental impacts from climate change or economic impacts from fossil fuel depletion. With less energy, we will eventually see less trade and transport (though perhaps global communication networks could be maintained, if scaled back).

In sum, a reversion to a more localized form of social organization is an entirely predictable consequence of past and current trends. It therefore makes sense to start thinking about how localization could be accomplished in ways that maximize benefits and minimize costs.

Argument 2: Localism is desirable.

The past few decades have seen many social movements advocating localization, driven mostly by concerns for equity, human rights, and environmental protection (as still-local indigenous communities struggle to maintain their way of life in the face of globalization). From "Buy Local" campaigns in communities across the US to "Transition Town" initiatives and nonprofit advocacy organizations like Local Futures, this work has sprung largely from the theoretical foundations of bioregionalism laid down in the 1970s and 1980s. Localism is largely a corrective to the depredations and excesses of corporate globalization, but there is more to it than that.

As Sebastian Junger argues in his influential book *Tribe*, humans evolved living in small groups and function best in contexts where they know one another face-to-face. It is in our communities where we (as individuals, families, businesses, and organizations of all kinds) most directly interact with the people and institutions that make up our society. And it is where we are most affected by the decisions that society makes. When political and social entities grow in size, the likelihood of power concentration increases. And people tend to handle lots of power poorly. The only sure way to keep power inequality from causing extreme injustice and social instability is to keep the scale of social organization small.

Moreover, we work hardest to protect places we know and love. "Nature" is an abstraction, but the urge to protect one's home is powerful. That is why place-based conservation efforts (such as local land and farm trusts, community parks, and publicly managed commons) are often more effective than campaigns by distant city dwellers to save rainforests and emblematic species on the far side of the planet.

Much of the best climate change mitigation work is happening at the local level. In the national and international arena, political polarization and the power of the fossil fuel lobby have prevented strong action, but in local communities—where citizens can talk face-to-face—climate action has been easier to achieve. For example, where I live (Sonoma County, California) all cities have signed on to decarbonization goals far more ambitious than ones adopted at the federal level during the Obama administration.

Of course, localism won't automatically solve all our problems. Anyone who has ever worked in local politics or a grassroots organizing campaign knows that corruption, polarization, and power grabs can afflict even the smallest communities. Some local environmental and community welfare efforts succeed; others fail.

Further, many of the world's current counter-globalization trends appear steeped in parochialism, right-wing populism, and racism. Brexit and the efforts of the current US administration to build a wall on the nation's southern border seem to be driven largely by fear and distrust of immigrants and refugees—attitudes that are worrisome in the context of growing flows of people from the Global South fleeing climate chaos and increasing political instability. I would argue that these are signs that the recent cycle of global integration has already run its course. We can't buck the tide of history. Our task is not to resist localism, but to push for a humane localism—to make the most of its opportunities, while avoiding as much as possible its potential pitfalls. If the inevitable trend toward localism is not led by those who are pro-social and visionary, it will instead be led by the worst opportunists.

In the best instance, communities can benefit from localism by sharing and cooperating across geographic boundaries through informal networks, as Transition Towns have done. However, it is by no means assured that electricity grids and global communications can be maintained over the long run, as energy and financial flows decline chaotically. While we still benefit from those global flows, it makes sense to push for worldwide climate agreements and other sane policies. Global movements along these lines (e.g., Extinction Rebellion) can benefit from diverse voices and strategies arising from, and aligned with, local concerns and existing regional organizations. But it also makes sense to envision and plan for a peaceable, compassionate, and virtuous path down the ladder of societal scale.

The bottom line: Even if you find argument 2 less than convincing, argument 1 is probably not negotiable. A Great Unraveling is in store, and has evidently already commenced. How shall we navigate it?