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## SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

# Declarations of Independents: On Local Knowledge and Localist Knowledge

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### Abstract

*Localist movements support increased local ownership of regional economies and oppose the colonization of local economies by corporate firms, franchises, and agribusiness. Events organized by a “buy local” and “anti-big-box” organization in upstate New York provide the point of departure for an exploration of the meanings of the terms “local” and “independent.” Drawing on the discussion of “knowledge practices” in this journal, the relationships among local knowledge, mainstream economic development knowledge, and the “localist knowledge” of social science research are explored. Strategic combinations of local knowledge and localist knowledge can provide a powerful basis for mobilizing political and consumer support for localist movements. Localist movements in the United States are situated in the broader currents of antiglobalization movements, new political coalitions, and neoliberalism. [Keywords: social movements, local knowledge, science, economic development, urban, globalization, neoliberalism]*

It is Sunday morning, a time when the deindustrialized city of Schenectady, New York generally looks like a ghost town, but people are walking up and down Jay Street, a downtown pedestrian mall with locally-owned retail shops and restaurants that are open and busy. At one end of the street is the farmers' market, which has just moved outdoors for the 2009 summer season. At the other end of the street is Proctor's, a nonprofit organization that inhabits a grand theater that dates back to the city's wealthier past as the home of General Electric and Alco, two companies that gave Schenectady the nickname of the city "that lights and hauls the world." Proctor's houses the farmer's market during the winter, but on this day it is sponsoring a "Buy Local Bash," which includes about thirty tables that feature the wares of locally-owned, independent businesses, a credit union, a small bank, and some nonprofit organizations. Local musicians play on the stage and feature a variety of genres, including classical guitar and rock. Joe Condon, a local radio host, holds drawings every hour, when the winner receives a free gift basket and other products from local businesses. At the same time, he reminds people of the value of small businesses and the need to support them, especially during a severe recession.

Many organizations helped sponsor the "Buy Local Bash," including the Downtown Schenectady Improvement Corporation, but the primary sponsor was Capital District Local First (CDLF), a business association that promotes the message of shifting consumption toward locally-owned, independent businesses as part of a broader transition to more sustainable and fair regional economies. In turn, CDLF is one of the roughly one-hundred independent business associations that have sprung up across the United States since the 1990s in support of locally-owned, independent businesses. It is affiliated with the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), a national organization that supports the project of building "local living economies," that is, economies based on locally-owned, independent businesses that include as part of their mission the goal of improving environmental sustainability, economic fairness, and local quality of life. BALLE integrates the diverse local networks by providing research reports, an annual conference, monthly round-up teleconferences, advice, summaries of best practices, and peer-to-peer networking among the national affiliate organizations.

The "Buy Local Bash" is therefore part of a broader reform movement oriented toward support of the locally-owned, independent business sector. In various articulations, localism—understood here as movements in

favor of increased local ownership, such as independent businesses, local farms, local media, and community finance, but also in opposition to big-box retail development and other projects associated with sprawl and environmental degradation—has become increasingly prominent in the United States. One barometer of the growing public awareness was a March, 2007, *Time* magazine cover, which read, “Forget Organic; Buy Local” (Cloud 2007). A more quantitative measure was based on the 2008 holiday season, when more than seventy alternative newsweeklies launched a campaign to encourage readers to pledge to spend \$100 of their holiday money at locally-owned stores (Karpel 2008). A post-holiday survey indicated that the campaigns were actually having some effect: whereas the major chain stores had year-to-year sales declines of 7 to 24 percent, and retail sales overall were down by nearly 10 percent, independent stores had declines of only 5 percent (Mitchell 2009a). Furthermore, in cities where there was a “buy local” campaign, sales for independent retailers declined by only 3 percent, compared with 5.6% in cities without such campaigns (*ibid.*).

The figures indicate that such grassroots mobilizations were having some effect on consumers. But they also raise a broader question of why support for local, independent business resonates with consumers at this particular historical moment. This essay will explore the meanings of “local” and “independent” in the context of localist movements in the United States, then discuss the relations between local knowledge and social scientific research on localism. In the process, the essay will contribute to the work of anthropologists who have helped to develop the “cultural turn” of social movement studies (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008, Holland et al. 2008, Kurzman 2008, Price et al. 2008) and a connection between social movement studies and science and technology studies (Hess 2007b). The research presented here is based on public events and published statements, but it also draws on considerable background based on formal interviews and background experience working with CDLF (Hess 2009a).

### **Local Meanings**

At the “Buy Local Bash,” CDLF had a table with literature defending the idea that consumers should shift some of their spending to locally-owned, independent businesses. A blue poster that gave ten reasons “to think

local, buy local, and be local” was available for sale, and a similar message appeared in the organization’s printed literature. The ten reasons were diverse. Some were strictly consumerist: local businesses provide “better customer service” and “more choices.” Others pointed more to economic development considerations: small businesses create “new jobs” and “invest in the community.” Other reasons were less tangible and pointed to quality-of-life issues: locally-owned, independent businesses “are leaders in the community and here to stay,” and they are “an integral part of our region’s distinctive character.” Another reason claimed that buying locally was associated with “reduced environmental impact.” Yet other reasons pointed to the “multiplier effect” of money that recirculates in the community (a topic to be discussed in more detail below) and the research that indicates that local businesses give more to local nonprofit organizations.

Many of the reasons given in support of buying “local first”—that is, to shift some of a household’s purchases to local and independent businesses, when it is possible and not extremely inconvenient—are common to the literature that is shared among the hundreds of independent business associations and related organizations across the country. They point to a vision of local economies and communities that includes a role for consumer-based motivations but goes beyond it. For example, one of the brochures has a discussion of the “price myth,” the idea that prices are always lower in the chains. Various arguments are raised about the price myth that operate within the logic of consumer choice, such as the claim that the products and services offered in the chains are often not of the same quality and that prices are not always lower at chains. However, the arguments also note that the chains often get huge tax concessions from local governments, and they often pay lower wages. Again, the discussion embeds the logic of consumerism in a broader analysis of distributional issues in the regional economy. Although there is a component of small-business interest-group politics in localism, it is also a reform movement because it is about how the structure of the regional economy fits into a vision of quality of life, including issues of economic development, environmental sustainability, the nonprofit sector, social fairness, and a sense of community.

In building a distinction between types of businesses, organizations such as CDLF are suggesting an analysis of the global economy that is at odds with a neoliberal vision of globalized, corporate capitalism that pro-

duces a rising tide of wealth. The terms “local” and “independent” are often used together to indicate a category of business that is to be preferred to “nonlocal” or “global” businesses and those that are “publicly traded.” The project of defining what constitutes a “locally-owned, independent” business is by no means straightforward. BALLE, perhaps wisely, leaves the politics of definitions up to the local affiliate networks, and as a result its affiliate networks include chambers of commerce, at least one community development organization, and even a statewide association for business social responsibility. In contrast, another umbrella organization, the American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA), offers a set of demarcation principles that, in my experience, provides the point of reference for membership criteria in many of the independent business associations. A locally-owned, independent business is defined as follows: “private, employee, community, or cooperative ownership; owned in majority by area resident(s); full decision-making function for the business lies with its owner(s); and no more than six outlets, bases of operation lie within a single state” (AMIBA 2009).

The independent, locally-owned business is defined in opposition to two other main categories of business. One is the publicly traded corporation: the stories of small business owners who lost control of their companies after going public (such as Ben and Jerry’s, which eventually was acquired by Unilever) are held up as a negative example. To a large degree, BALLE emerged out of the frustration with the appropriation of the business social and environmental responsibility movement by large corporations and with the experience of small businesses that grew and sold out to large corporations (Mokhiber and Weissman 2005). The other “other” of the locally-owned, independent business is the franchise, even if the retail outlet is locally owned and the umbrella organization is privately held (such as Dunkin Donuts), because such stores generally do not have full decision-making authority over the crucial issue of shifting their purchasing to other local businesses.

Even when operating with such clear guidelines, I have found that organizations run into various definitional problems. For example, if a business becomes publicly traded, is it forced to leave the organization because it is no longer “independent”? If the business is a credit union, should the limit on six branches be lifted? If so, why not lift the limit more generally, and allow some of the larger stores, such as local grocery stores or restaurant chains, that are still locally owned and independent?

Another definitional problem is the issue of geographical scope. Should the scope of “local” be limited to one city in a metropolitan area or to just one county? Many organizations adopt this strategy. However, some organizations cover an entire state (usually a small one, such as Vermont) or a huge metropolitan region, such as the greater Philadelphia or Boston area. In the case of CDLF and the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Boston, the regional organization has created more geographically localized “hubs” of small businesses, where much of the organizational work gets done.

This discussion suggests that the idea of the “local” in the context of the “buy local movement” is more than a reference to a place-based identity. It is part of an antiglobalization politics that is framed to appeal across the political spectrum. People located on both the political left and right find common ground in support for their local communities, and the politically divided petite bourgeoisie finds it easy to bridge other political differences under the uniting frame of “buying locally.” Thus, the “local” becomes a terrain where other kinds of political differences can be left at the door and new coalitions can be forged. The use of local identity as a basis for building coalitions is widely recognized, and it appears in other sorts of grassroots coalitions in the United States, such as ones that have emerged between Western ranchers and environmentalists (Weber 2003).

Although a powerful unifying mantle, the idea of “local” does not always smooth over the tension between the socially and environmentally oriented small businesses, which have a “living economy” vision of localism, and the more mainstream, Main Street small businesses, which are involved in the movement more as a business strategy and often with a strong anti-chainstore sentiment. Thus, there can be a division between a form of localism that is closer to an alternative industrial movement (such as pro-organic food, or pro-solar energy) and a form of localism that is closer to an industrial opposition movement (such as anti-genetically modified food, or anti-nuclear energy). The antichain store sentiment is often expressed in a parallel movement linked by other umbrella organizations, such as Sprawl Busters.

### **Antichain Store Politics**

A month before the Buy Local Bash, on a rainy Wednesday night, the American Legion hall in the historic village of Voorheesville was filled to

capacity. People were spilling out the door, and there were no parking spots for blocks. The meeting of New Scotlanders for Sound Economic Development (NS4SED) went on for two-and-a-half hours, as the townspeople of New Scotland, which included the villagers of Voorheesville, listened to a panel of local experts talk about the negative impacts of a proposed big-box shopping mall.

New Scotland is hard to characterize; it is a small town in upstate New York, but it is also part of the expanding frontier of suburbanization in the New York State Capital District. Its population includes working-class and farming families who have lived there for decades and even some people who can trace their ancestry to the Dutch colonists. But the town also includes some suburban housing developments and middle-class professionals who like the quieter pace of the community but work in nearby Capital District cities. The two groups have come together over a concern with preserving the town's farms, green spaces, and small-town feeling. There is considerable interest in avoiding the fate of suburban sprawl that occurred with Bethlehem and Guilderland, two other neighboring towns that are a little closer to Albany. Those towns heeded the call of retail developers only to find that they were plagued by crime, traffic congestion, four-lane highways, and increased tax burdens.

The issue of sprawl came to a head when New Scotland's planning board entertained a proposal from developers to build a 750,000 square-foot retail shopping center anchored by a big-box store. A group of opponents emerged, and after being rebuffed by the planning board, they went on to gain 2,000 signatures in support of a moratorium on the big-box decision. As they gathered signatures in this small town of 3,500 households, they realized that public opinion was strongly opposed to the big-box proposal. At the meeting, some of the organizers of the petition noted that, based on their door-to-door work gathering signatures and contacting almost all of the households in the town, they found that less than five percent of the town supported the big-box proposal. However, the planning board did not respond to popular opinion, a decision that led to much speculation and some hard feelings. Because the planning board is selected in staggered terms that last seven years, it is somewhat insulated from public opinion. As a result, in 2009 NS4SED took the next step of proposing Local Law I, a size cap law that would also shift decision-making from the appointed planning board to the elected town board, which is more directly accountable to public opinion.



A central point of reference in the controversy was the vision of the community that was articulated in a land use plan developed in 1994 and that explicitly favored a “smaller, rural character type of commercial development” (Morrison 2009). Some NS4SED members also favored an alternative approach to retail development that included smart-growth principles such as “a village/hamlet-type of main street with mixed uses” (NS4SED 2008). In the panel discussion in April 2009, the leaders of NYSED also discussed the benefits to the community of having a vibrant, locally-owned, independent business community as well as the value of a walkable, small-scale, new urbanist design that, in effect, would build on the pre-automobile scale of neighborhood design in the village of Voorheesville. On this issue, there was a convergence of vision with CDLF, even though the two groups approached the topic from differing perspectives. Both groups shared a mixture of concern with the negative effects of big-box development and support for the vision of communities that have vibrant, locally-owned, and independent businesses and farms as well as planning principles oriented toward a more sustainable and fair regional economy. However, when I spoke to one of the leaders of NY4SED, she indicated that the small business community opposed the big-box plan but had not taken a leading role due to fear of losing customers.

The NY4SED forum, like the “Buy Local Bash,” marshaled a body of knowledge and arguments in support of an alternative pathway in economic development. For example, an attorney talked about the details of tax law, the former chair of the planning board talked about his efforts dating back to the 1970s to establish a town master plan and explained why they had opted to insulate the planning board from immediate political winds, and a planner gave a basic lecture on smart growth and new urbanist design. An architect showed the impact of the big-box development on traffic patterns and roads, and he left the room with the breathtaking statistic that the main two-lane road of the town not only would have one car per second on the road during rush hour but also would have to become a four-lane highway due to state law. A doctor spoke from the floor about the likely rise of health-care burdens, from asthma rates to traffic fatalities, due to the increased traffic. Statistically, they could also predict roughly the number of children who would be run over by cars, a statement that brought a gasp from the room.

There was also a detailed presentation by a retail development specialist, who explained why the low population density of the town and exis-

tence of other big-box shopping centers in neighboring suburbs made it likely that such a large-scale shopping center would become another big-box ghost town after a few years. She added detailed statistics about the rise in crime rates that occurred in neighboring towns that had gone the route of sprawl and big-box development. But perhaps most damning of all was the analysis of taxes, which showed that the likely \$100 per household reduction in an average tax bill of \$4500, which the developers trumpeted, would easily be overwhelmed by increases in tax bills for police and highways, as had occurred in neighboring towns.

In summary, a variety of different disciplinary and professional knowledges—legal, planning, architectural, and retail economics—were deployed in the presentations to show that the project would likely fail for the developer and community alike. The credibility of the experts was enhanced by their status as town residents, and they were able to apply remote studies and statistics to concrete, powerpoint images of the implications of those statistics for the town. They could name places and businesses that everyone in the community recognized. Their expert, professional knowledge therefore served as a form of counterexpertise (Woodhouse and Nieuwma 2001) to the claims of developers that the retail shopping plaza would bring jobs and new tax revenue to the town, but the counterexpertise was anchored in specific references to landmark buildings, roads, and other aspects of local knowledge that made them residents rather than outsiders. It is this intersection of local knowledge and what I will call “localist” knowledge that I now turn to explore.

### **Local Knowledge and Antiglobalization Politics**

In both the “Buy Local Bash” and NY4SED town forum, the discourse of the “local” is not limited to emotional appeals to place-based identity and quality-of-life issues. Rather, considerable levels of expert and professional knowledge are being marshaled. From an epistemic perspective, there is an interesting convergence of both local knowledge and expert knowledge. For example, I have heard business owners in the Capital District trace, often to the month, a steep decline in sales that corresponds with the opening of a big-box store in the area. They can add a local professional knowledge based on statistics such as monthly sales volume to the general perception, often stated by older residents, who remember a time when there was a different quality of life, in which store owners knew

their products and their customers, and the downtowns of Albany, Schenectady, Troy, and other towns were full of shoppers who had decent incomes from their jobs in the now closed manufacturing plants. Although such local knowledge is often not articulated into a full analysis of the impact of globalization and corporate consolidation on local economies, it can tap into popular anger at the predatory relationship between large corporations and communities, an anger that has only become magnified since the advent of the 2007 financial crisis. Thus, the meaning of “local” is connected with a populist diagnosis of a declining quality of life that is part of both occupational and life experiences.

A central aspect of the convergence of local knowledge and professional knowledge is the sense of the loss of local sovereignty of the community with respect to the global economy. Anthropologists such as Ferguson (2005) and Ong (2006) have identified the shifts in the territorial sovereignty of small postcolonial states in the least wealthy portions of Africa and Asia, where multinational corporations and nongovernmental organizations have become *de facto* sovereigns. In a similar way, the spaces of metropolitan areas in the US increasingly have come under the control of corporate enclaves, where space is often demarcated and sealed off from the public, or at least some types of public activity, in the form of office parks, shopping malls, big-box shopping districts, and gated communities.

Among localist movement leaders who have become national figures, the connections between the sense of lost sovereignty and neoliberal globalization are well articulated. I have reviewed some examples elsewhere (Hess 2009a), and it will suffice here to give one example in a statement by Judy Wicks, the owner of the White Dog Cafe in Philadelphia and cofounder of BALLE:

In order to protect all that I care deeply about, I needed to step out of my own company, out of the White Dog Café, and start to work together with other businesses to build an alternative to corporate globalization....Rather than a global economy controlled by large multinational corporations, our movement envisions a global economy with a decentralized network of local economies made up of what we call living enterprises: small, independent, locally-owned businesses of human scale. These living enterprises create community wealth and vitality while working in harmony with natural systems (2004:5).

Hammel, the other cofounder of BALLE, has similar concerns with corporate-led globalization. As he commented, “The only thing you can do to Wal-Mart is to do what they did with Standard Oil and take it apart. There is an inherent flaw in the way they operate” (Mokhiber and Weissman 2005). Or, as Stacy Mitchell, another localist leader and author of the *Big-Box Swindle* (2006a), commented with respect to the corporate chains:

They routinely sacrifice valuable community assets, such as a beautiful view or the quiet of a neighborhood, in pursuit of their own expansion and profitability. The executives in charge make decisions from afar; they do not have to live with the effects of their actions. If they inundate a neighborhood with traffic, or pave an open field, it is not their own property values or quality of life that matters (2006b).

Localist leaders contrast the world of the locally-owned, independent business with that of the multinational, publicly traded corporation, but they also, as Wicks does explicitly in the passage above, suggest a vision of an alternative global economy. Frequently accused by critics on both the left and right as advocating middle-class enclavism—circling up the wagons into local economies that benefit the privileged in wealthy countries—there is instead considerable interest in what I call “global localism,” or a global economy constituted along an economic model that might be compared with the experiments of fair trade. For this reason, the “buy local” campaigns are often called “local first.” A hierarchy of preferences is constituted, from buying local products from locally-owned businesses (such as local farm produce at farmers’ markets and coops), to buying nonlocal products made by locally-owned businesses elsewhere in the world and sold through locally-owned businesses, to buying corporate products from locally-owned businesses, and finally to buying corporate products in the chains. Consumption is used as a tool, as a way of importing politics into the economy, albeit one that is tempered by the fact that many products are not available in the local economy or even from the global local economy. There is considerable convergence with, and in my experience in New York considerable interest in, selling fair trade products, but localism also offers a boundary on the cooptation that is emerging in fair trade, particularly its expansion through sales to corporate retailers (Moberg 2008).

Although the localist movement tends to have a middle-class address, it expands the horizon of the socially and environmentally responsible

consumer from, for example, organic food to organic, local food or organic, fair-trade food. In the process, a series of class coalitions are formed: the middle-class shopper, often located in the liberal professions; the petite-bourgeois shopkeeper; and the small manufacturer or farmer. The coalitions give the movement an anticorporate but not anticapitalist politics akin to those of the populist and progressive movements of earlier periods (Johnston 2003). Localism is not a poor people's movement. Rather, it articulates a middle-class radicalism in the global field of antiglobalization movements.

### **Independents and Independence**

From this perspective, the word "independent" also has a complex meaning in the context of localist politics. The technical meaning of the word is that the business is closely held and privately held. The result is that small businesses owners retain control over their business; unlike small businesses supported by venture capital, they are not required to pursue a trajectory of rapid growth and profit maximization that culminates in a liquidity event. "Independent" means that a business owner can make decisions in favor of support for local nonprofit organizations, living wages, better working conditions, and environmental sustainability. The ideal business is an anchor of the community; it may turn a profit, but like nonprofit organizations, the primary goal is to bring in enough revenue to meet expenses and achieve a wide variety of goals rather than to minimize costs and maximize revenues.

The word "independent" has also come to be used alongside "local" in part because of the growth of "local washing." Like green-washing, "local washing" is the corporate appropriation of local. In some cases, it can be transparent and even funny, such as, "Shop at your local Big Box; we're you're neighbors." However, local washing has become increasingly sophisticated. For example, Wal-Mart has tested a "buy local" program of products made in Ohio and sold at a branch of the store in that state (Sheeban 2007). Craft breweries that are owned by a corporate parent sometimes hide their affiliation, and in 2009 Starbucks tested new coffee shops that did not use the Starbucks brand name but instead appeared to be locally-owned stores (Kesmodel 2007, Mitchell 2009b). For these reasons, the term "local" is increasingly used in a phrase with "independent" as "locally-owned and independent." For example, the survey released by

Stacy Mitchell (2009a) about the relative decline in sales used the term “independent retailers” rather than “local businesses.”

However, the term “independent” goes beyond this more technical, economic sense. Elsewhere, I have suggested that attention to the role of charged cultural repertoires is one of the main contributions that anthropologists have brought to the cultural turn in interdisciplinary social movement studies (Hess 2007b). In this case, independent business associations often organize “Independents Day” celebrations about the same time as “Independence Day.” Light-hearted puns such as “Austin Unchained” also suggest a revolutionary or rebellious politics, but the metaphors are often a hook that leads to a sober economic analysis. For example, localist leader Stacy Mitchell issued a “Declaration of Independents” for her “Twenty-Sixth Annual E.F. Schumacher Lecture.” Invoking the Boston Tea Party, she noted that the ships were owned by the East India Company, “a powerful transnational corporation that had recently suffered losses, in large part because the colonists had boycotted its merchandise” (2006b). The British Parliament’s Tea Act, she continues, was passed to drive small competitors out of business. As she explains:

Our forefathers and –mothers understood that local self-reliance was essential to democracy and that concentrated economic power was as much a threat to their independence as the British crown, but sometime in the past two centuries we seem to have lost track of this vital truth. Today our communities are fast becoming colonies once again, subject to a new crop of powerful transnational corporations with names like Wal-Mart and Target, Home Depot and Barnes & Noble” (2006b).

From this metaphor, she launches into a detailed account of the effects of big-box stores on manufacturing in the United States, with examples of firms that have been forced to relocate production abroad due to pressure from their big-box retailers.

In a similar way, David Korten, the chair of the board of *YES!* magazine and a board member of BALLE, ends his most recent book, *Agenda for a New Economy*, with a “global declaration of independence from Wall Street and its global counterparts” (2008:171). He develops a sustained comparison between “the independence movement that liberated thirteen colonies” and “the efforts of those seeking independence from Wall Street” (174). He

also develops a twelve-point plan for “liberating Main Street” from the clutches of Wall Street that includes substantial corporate reform.

In short, the sometimes light-hearted puns and occasionally stretched historical comparisons involving independence and chains connect a serious political strategy of bipartisan, anticorporate populism to the revolutionary tradition in US politics. The metaphor of “independence” is by no means new in US social movements; one can find similar uses of the Declaration of Independence in the women’s suffrage movement of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the metaphor also appears in mainstream political discourse, especially with respect to “energy independence,” which has been a clarion call for US energy policy since the 1970s. Although directed at dependence on overseas oil, the flip side of “energy independence” discourse is the need to produce energy domestically. The substitution of energy imports can be configured as a centralized, corporate-led endeavor (as in nuclear energy, renewable energy controlled by utilities and generation companies, ethanol processing by large corporations, and even coal), but it can also be connected with localist movements via small-scale, grassroots forms of energy production. As in these other examples of the uses of “independence” in the political field, the rhetoric of independence positions the “buy local” movement as deeply “American” and consistent with mainstream political discourse. By wrapping localism not only in the US flag but also in the revolutionary flag, the rhetoric works to deflect a characterization of the movement as “unAmerican” and “foreign,” as occurred with traditional labor-oriented radicalism.

The idea of “independence” also connects the “buy local” movement to the “antichain store” movement. In the antichain store movement, the term “independence” is often not used explicitly, but there is a strong sense that communities have become prey to large corporations and development interests. The opposition between the local community and a powerful, colonizing agent maps onto histories of local resistance struggles, including the anticolonial tradition in the US. The two movements—a “buy local” movement and an “antichain store” movement—converge, but the oppositional politics of the antichain store movement are anchored more in the perceived threat to a town’s quality of life and financial status, whereas the pro-alternative politics of the “buy local” movement operate more with a vision of community amelioration.

The two movements also converge on policy reforms. Here, the meaning of “local” and “independence” is translated into specific public policies that

would help level the playing field in favor of locally-owned, independent businesses. One example of convergence is legislation in favor of size caps for commercial zoning, but there are various other efforts where a common ground has also emerged: legislation in support of a requirement for economic impact studies for large retail stores, following the model of the Informed Growth Act of Maine; formula business restrictions introduced via local zoning ordinances, as have been passed in numerous towns and counties; purchasing preferences for local and state governments for locally-owned businesses, following laws introduced in Alaska, Montana, and other states; and a ban on tax abatements, or incentives, that one city in a metropolitan area offers to businesses if they relocate to the city, as was passed in Arizona. Through political reforms, there is increasing awareness that the call for “local independence” is not simply a question of getting individuals to shift their consumer preferences; it also involves mobilizing constituents for political reform. To do so, the movements operate in the field of economic development politics, where social science research and theories of economic development are often an important point of reference.

### **From Antigloblization Politics to Localist Knowledge**

Anthropologists frequently speak of “local knowledge,” but the term has often been left as an undefined rubric. Even Geertz’s (1985) book of that title has little discussion of the concept per se. For ethnographic projects situated in remote settings with radically different languages and practices from those of the ethnographer, it may not be so necessary to problematize the concept. By extension, even in a repatriated anthropology the concept of local knowledge may be intuitive: people know a great deal about the places where they live; they often have particularly prized and valuable knowledge, such as where to find a competent, affordable, and reliable plumber. Local knowledge is also political and cultural; there is a repository of knowledge about local power structures, ethnic conflicts, and neighborhood relationships. There is also an historical local knowledge, in which older residents and longtime storeowners can talk about how their region has changed over time.

The localist movement may have some general theoretical implications because it puts into circulation different types of knowledge about locations. Certainly, as indicated above, Capital District Local First and New Scotlanders for Sound Economic Development rely on local knowledge in



order to articulate their vision and message to potential members, consumers, and voters. However, as important as local knowledge is as a ground upon which a movement can be framed and resources mobilized, especially when the movement is based on a perceived place-based threat, knowledge that is powerful for one purpose is less appropriate for others. Local knowledge has a fragile credibility when placed in the rational-critical environments of political deliberation and media contestation where experts are squared off against each other. It can be framed as anecdotal, nostalgic, and even reactionary.

More specifically, local knowledge that articulates a predatory relationship between corporate capital and community businesses tends to be rejected by the academic knowledge of economics as a myopic view of a broader historical transition. From the perspective of mainstream economics, the economic dislocations that communities have experienced in the wake of trade liberalization, deindustrialization, and the consolidation of retail are part of a long-term transition that will ultimately be beneficial. The new efficiencies of the liberalized global economy, they argue, will bring lower prices to consumers, and the workers in the less efficient firms that are forced to close will eventually find jobs in new industries with higher levels of productivity and consequently higher wages. What appears to be a negative historical change from the perspective of the local knowledge of everyday experiences of local economies—stores that close down, neighborhoods that deteriorate, crime that increases, and friends who lose jobs—is reframed as a short-term dislocation in a long-term process that is eventually beneficial. The very “localness” of local knowledge is turned against it, because it can only manage to perceive short-term and localized dislocations instead of the potential for a beneficial long-term, globalized transition.

To counter the knowledge of mainstream economics and its justifications of corporate-led globalization, movement organizations need another type of knowledge, one that can serve as a countervailing expertise to the cosmopolitan science of mainstream economic arguments. However, when activists and advocates look for such knowledge, they often encounter the empty spaces of “undone science,” of studies that were never done (Frickel et al. 2010, Hess 2007a). Where they do find research in support of their local knowledge, the research tends to be positioned in subordinate networks in the scientific field, where the knowledge may have higher credibility than local knowledge but lower credibility, at least within the scientific field, than mainstream economic knowledge. Thus,

there are some social scientists who work outside the mainstream of economics, often in lower-status professions such as geography or sociology, who have documented some of the negative effects of chain stores on regional economies (e.g., Artz and Stone 2006, Goetz and Swaminathan 2006, Goetz and Rapasingha 2006, Neumark et al. 2007, Stone 1995) and conversely the positive effects of local ownership (e.g., Tolbert 2005, Tolbert et al. 2002). Arguably the oldest and foundational study in this field is the ethnography written by anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt (1978), who showed the positive effects of high levels of local ownership in a comparative study of two California agricultural towns. The small body of what I will call “localist knowledge” suggests that industrial consolidation has negative effects on employment levels, nonprofit sector activity, third spaces, health-care, and even voter turnout. Occasionally, localist advocates draw on such studies to bolster their case for a pattern of economic development based on smaller, locally-owned enterprises.

As I have suggested above, both NY4SED and CDLF draw on various localist studies to develop counterarguments to those offered by big-box developers about the benefits of “development” to local communities. For example, both groups cited an important body of studies that I call “local multiplier studies” (e.g., Civic Economics 2002, 2004, 2007). When one looks a little at who funds the local multiplier studies, it is interesting that most have been funded by independent businesses, their associations, or sympathetic nonprofit organizations, not government or industry. They are examples of what I have termed “civil society research,” or research that is funded by the civil society sector as a countervailing force to research funded by industry, the academy, or the government (Hess 2009b). Thus, whereas conventional multiplier studies examine the effect of a local manufacturer on the regional economy as a whole, the local multiplier studies examine the effects of substituting locally-owned, independent retail for chain stores.

The central statistic of the local multiplier studies is a simple statement such as the following: For every \$100 at a locally-owned business, about \$70 recirculates in the local economy when spent in a locally-owned, independent business, in contrast with only \$40 that recirculates for money spent at a chain store. The actual figure varies by city and industry, but in many cases it is nearly a two-to-one ratio. The reasons for the effect include profit retention by local business owners, higher donations by local businesses to the nonprofit sector, higher levels of purchasing by independents from other

local businesses, and higher taxes paid by the independents to local governments. Likewise, whereas the construction of a new big-box store tends to decrease the number of retail jobs in a county, increased spending at locally-owned, independent stores creates more jobs for the regional economy. As I have learned in countless conversations with local business leaders, the local multiplier studies are easy for local business owners to grasp, and it both matches and sharpens their local knowledge. For example, they know that they are the ones often tapped to donate to the soccer team and girl scouts, and they often buy from other local businesses. They see the multiplier effect every day in their business decisions.

To summarize, I am suggesting a relationship among three types of knowledge: local knowledge, mainstream economic knowledge, and localist knowledge, or knowledge that is critical of mainstream economic assumptions about the general benefits of trade liberalization and the corporate take-over of the independent business sector. Local knowledge about the quality of life of a community, especially comparisons over time and across communities in a region, becomes the basis for popular interest in (and in some cases, economic funding of) localist knowledge, because localist knowledge serves as counterexpertise for the mainstream economic knowledge that urban growth coalitions use to dismiss the epistemic claims of localist organizations. Localist knowledge therefore legitimates but also refines and refocuses what people already know about their communities; it reshapes local knowledge just as it is shaped by it. But localist knowledge also reshapes local politics, because it is a resource in local political fields where the contours of a regional economy are contested. The position of localist knowledge in the local political field in turn draws attention to the subordinate network in the academic field, and it may result in changes in the attention that social scientists give to localist research programs. For example, a student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst wrote what is probably the first graduate thesis using the local multiplier effect, a study that methodologically improved on the local multiplier studies and drew significantly on knowledge of BALLE, the localist movement, and the politics of economic development conflicts (Elvin 2008).

## Conclusions

In the book *Local Democracy Under Siege*, anthropologists Dorothy Holland, Donald Nonini, and Catherine Lutz provide a detailed analysis of

the transformations of local politics in North Carolina. They pay particular attention to the devolutionary politics of the neoliberal state. Building on a previous study in which Gulbrandsen and Holland (2001) found that the initiatives of national governments can tilt grassroots organizing away from activism toward private sector participation, Holland and colleagues suggest that “outsourced government with its heavy reliance on public-private partnerships is frighteningly devoid of guarantees that all segments of the public will be served” (2007:234). Much as Ferguson (2005), Ong (2006), and other anthropologists have found in the less wealthy regions in the world, Holland and colleagues concluded, “This neoliberal blueprint sets the stage for a select minority being players while the rest exist off (or exit from) the map of the new political landscape” (2007:236).

Although their prognosis is generally not encouraging for researchers and activists who are troubled by neoliberal globalization, Holland and colleagues do point to groups of local citizens who, in some cases, form nonprofit organizations that engage local governments via new avenues of public participation. Such participation is restricted in many ways, including legacies of class, race, and gender barriers, but the anthropologists find in such grassroots organizations some potential for a new “more hands-on, participatory democracy” (2007:240). For the grassroots effort at invigorated democracy to be successful, Holland and colleagues suggest that “communities have to become more economically and environmentally sustainable” (241). For such efforts, I would add, localist movements represent one avenue for building communities that also break down the ties of dependence on large corporations that many cities have had to confront. Such movements will take different forms across the world; for example, in Argentina a similar antiglobalization economics has drawn on a tradition of cooperatives and cooperation (Faulk 2008).

As anthropologists think through the issue of grassroots mobilizations that develop alternatives to corporate-led, neoliberal forms of globalization, we will need to consider the complex issues of knowledge. The epistemic dimensions of social movements have received increasing attention, although more in STS than in social movement studies (see Hess et al. 2007 for a review). Within this journal Casas-Cortés and colleagues (2008) have developed the topic from a cultural perspective in their discussion of the “knowledge practices” of social movements, a term used to draw attention to both scientific knowledge and the less formal and often place-based types of knowledge such as “know-how.” Fundamentally in

agreement with their approach to knowledge in social movements, I have relied here in part on an extended Bourdieusian concept of fields (1991, 2001) to chart the homologous positioning of knowledges in the scientific field and in local political fields, and to explore the traffic between the two fields in the form of relations between local and localist knowledge. In doing so, one can discern the potential of such knowledges to be disruptive as well as marginalized, and to interact dynamically in ways that go beyond the standard characterizations of lay and expert knowledge (e.g., Wynne 1996). Rather, as in the case of the businesspeople who formed Capital District Local First and the coalition of New Scotlanders for Sound Economic Development, one finds local residents with professional knowledge and capacity to marshal social science expertise (even, in some cases, to produce it) who can also mix their localist arguments with a profound local knowledge of the community where they live. The capacity to bring both types of knowledge together can be quite powerful, at least in local economic development controversies and (as Wal-Mart and Starbucks have already recognized) in shaping consumer preferences.

Elites that benefit from the current order of neoliberal globalization have a well-oiled scientific machinery of economic research to support the defense of the current order. Social scientists who challenge the machinery tend to be located outside the dominant networks of the social sciences, that is, away from both the higher-status and better-paid social science professions, such as economics and management, and the higher-status departments within those fields. It is easy for the dominant networks to ignore their lower-status critics. But what is less easy to ignore is the existence of local knowledge of the negative side effects of neoliberalism and the transformation of local knowledge into localist movements that seek out, publicize, fund, and even produce localist knowledge. Where localist advocates encounter undone science, they may support civil society research, which takes place largely outside the academy but is occasionally linked to the research programs of the nondominant networks of the social sciences. This research is continuous with peer-reviewed science, although it is not always published in peer-reviewed venues. But through umbrella organizations such as BALLE localists also develop and circulate a translocal craft knowledge of “what works” in localist organizing, something akin to the types of knowledge charted in the work of Casas-Cortés and colleagues (2008).

In the US context, one should not underestimate the importance of the emergence of businesses, activists, and advocates who eschew the busi-

ness plans of fast growth, venture capital, and liquidity events and instead choose to be rooted in the slow-growth or even no-growth models of community businesses. But one should also recognize some of the limitations and counter-currents. One might interpret the movements as politicizing consumption and bringing issues of citizenship into the consumer role. New practices at the frontiers of citizenship and consumption are being developed that could have profound political implications. However, one might also argue that even the blending of citizenship and consumption tends to reduce politics to markets, a move that is consistent with neoliberalism. Yet in response to that concern, one might note that the politicization of consumption is also accompanied by a wide range of government-oriented action, including mobilizations in support of size caps and zoning ordinances, that both the anti-big-box and pro-local organizations support. Those policy reforms are more consistent with the regulatory activism associated with the social liberal state. As I have argued elsewhere, ideological labels such as neoliberal and social liberal only go so far in interpreting localist politics (Hess 2009a).

One of the unforeseen implications of the unraveling of the social liberalism of the New Deal and Great Society is that the petite bourgeoisie may be drifting away from a half-century of alliance with conservative politics, states' rights rhetoric, and opposition to centralized government represented by social liberalism. There is already some evidence that public employee unions see their fate tied to the success of the local business sector and that the entrepreneurs of the BALLE organizations are concerned with employee ownership, living wages, and other traditional labor issues. The potential to connect small capital and labor, as well as the environmental and social justice movements, provides some political opportunities for a new era of progressive politics. Theorists of neoliberalism would do well to pay attention to possibilities for political reconfiguration that decades of privatization, deregulation, and devolution have engendered.

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