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A Return to the Local

by Wendell Berry

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COMMENTARY

A Return to the Local: You Stay Home Too

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, essayist, and poet, argues that the basis of a sustainable economy is the vitality of local economies, which are fundamentally different from the omnipresent global system now swallowing up local enterprise all over the world. Some of his comments offer arresting challenges to prevailing beliefs, and we excerpt a few of them here. The questions Berry addresses (boldface type) were suggested by comments he made in a recent speech:

As the world's growing environmental crisis becomes more publicized, is there a risk that it is also being too simplified?

The "environmental crisis" has happened because the human household or economy is in conflict at almost every point with the household of nature. We have built our household on the assumption that the natural household is simple and can be simply used. We have assumed increasingly over the last five hundred years that nature is merely a supply of "raw materials," and that we may safely possess those materials by taking them.... And so we will be wrong if we attempt to correct what we perceive as "environmental" problems without correcting the economic oversimplification that caused them.

What do you mean by "economic oversimplification?"

What has happened is that most people in [the developed world] have given proxies to the corporations to produce and provide all of their food, clothing, and shelter. Moreover, they are rapidly giving proxies to corporations or governments to provide entertainment, education, child care, care of the sick and elderly, and many other kinds of "service" that once were carried on informally and inexpensively by

individuals or households or communities....

The trouble with this is that a proper concern for nature and our use of nature must be practiced, not by our proxy-holders, but by ourselves.... The "environmental crisis," in fact, can be solved only if people, individually and in their communities, recover responsibility for their thoughtlessly given proxies.

Doesn't the proxy given to corporations require them to be responsive to the values of consumers they sell to, as communicated to them through the market?

We live, as we must sooner or later recognize, in an era of sentimental economics and, consequently, of sentimental politics. Sentimental communism holds in effect that everybody and everything should suffer for the good of "the many" who, though miserable in the present, will be happy in the future for exactly the same reasons that they are miserable in the present.

Sentimental capitalism is not so different from sentimental communism as the corporate and political powers claim. Sentimental capitalism holds in effect that everything small, local, private, personal, natural, good, and beautiful must be sacrificed in the interest of the "free market" and the great corporations, which will bring unprecedented security and happiness to "the many"—in, of course, the future....

Communism and “free-market” capitalism both are modern versions of oligarchy. In their propaganda, both justify violent means by good ends, which always are put beyond reach by the violence of the means. The trick is to define the end vaguely—“the greatest good of the greatest number” or “the benefit of the many”—and keep it at a distance. For example, the U.S. government’s agricultural policy, or non-policy, since 1952 has merely consented to the farmers’ predicament of high costs and low prices; it has never envisioned or advocated in particular the prosperity of farmers or of farmland, but has only promised “cheap food” to consumers and

“survival” to the “larger and more efficient” farmers who supposedly could adapt to and endure the attrition of high costs and low prices.

If the economy is unsustainable, which means it ultimately leads to ruin, how does it disguise this outcome sufficiently to get people to keep investing in it?

It does so by false accounting. It substitutes for the real economy, by which we build and maintain (or do not maintain) our household, a symbolic

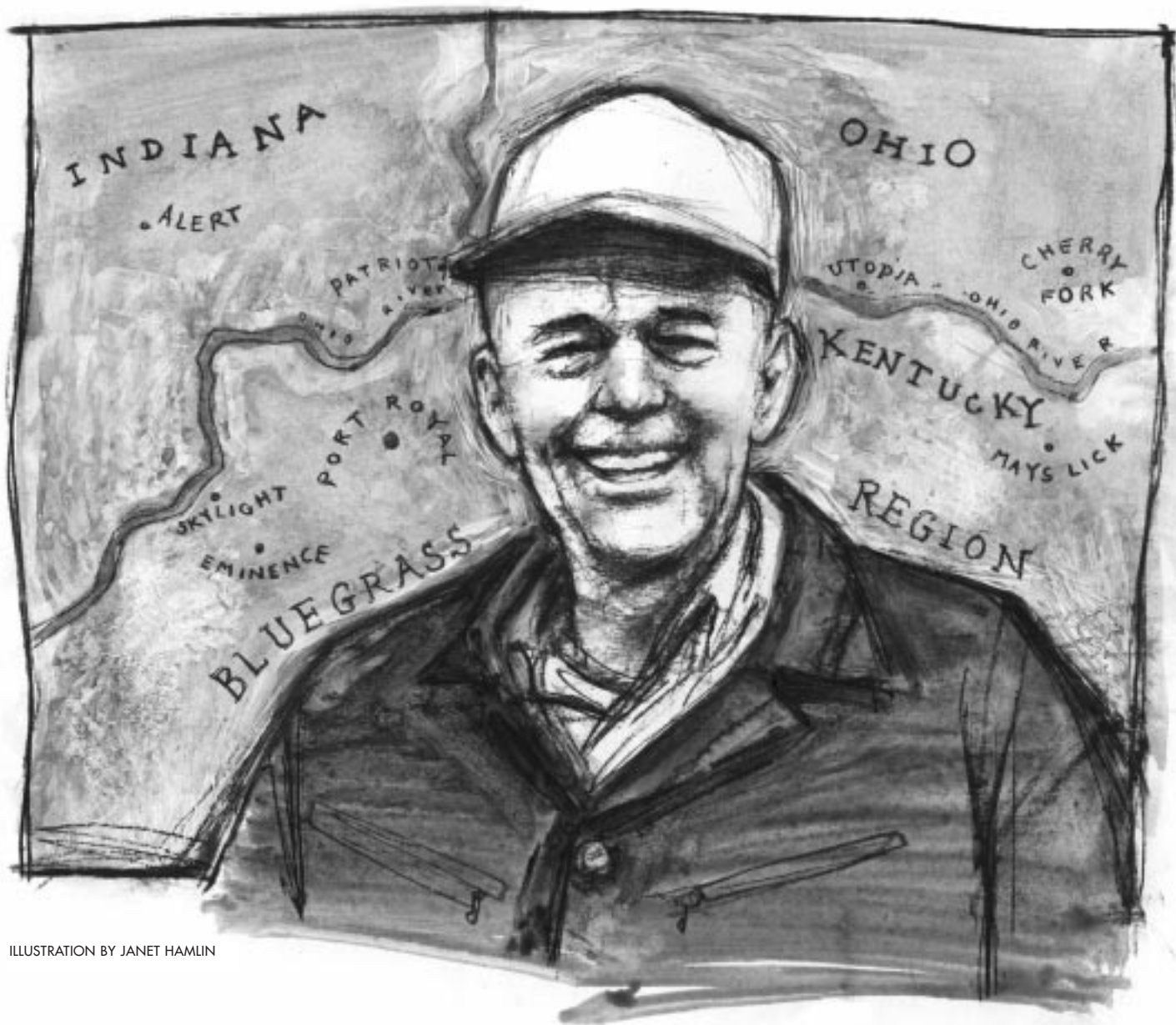


ILLUSTRATION BY JANET HAMLIN

economy of money, which in the long run cannot symbolize or account for anything but itself. And so we have before us the spectacle of unprecedented “prosperity” and “economic growth” in a land of degraded farms, forests, ecosystems, and watersheds, failing families, and perishing communities.

This moral and economic absurdity exists for the sake of the allegedly “free” market, the single principle of which is this: commodities will be produced wherever they can be produced at the lowest cost, and consumed wherever they will bring the highest price....

But the “free market” idea introduces into government a sanction of an inequality that is not implicit in any idea of democratic liberty: namely that the “free market” is freest to those who have the most money, and is not free at all to those with little or no money. Walmart, for example, as a large corporation “freely” competing against local, privately owned businesses, has virtually all the freedom, and its small competitors virtually none.

To make too cheap and sell too high, there are two requirements:

One requirement is that you must have a lot of consumers with surplus money and unlimited wants. For the time being, there are plenty of these consumers in the “developed” countries. The problem, for the time being easily solved, is simply to keep them relatively affluent and dependent on purchased supplies.

The other requirement is that the market for labor and raw materials should remain depressed relative to the market for retail commodities. This means that the supply of workers should exceed demand, and that the land-using economy should be allowed or encouraged to overproduce.

So, how does this system manage to keep labor costs low, and land overproducing?

To keep the cost of labor low, it is necessary only to entice or force country people to move into the cities, and to continue to introduce labor-replacing technology. In this way it is possible to maintain a “pool” of people who are in the threatened position of being mere consumers and also poor, and who therefore are eager to go to work for low wages.

To cause the land-using economies to overproduce is even simpler. The farmers are not organized.... Increasingly, they must sell, not to neighbors or to neighboring towns and cities, but to

Stay Home

I will wait here in the fields
to see how well the rain
brings on the grass.
In the labor of the fields
longer than a man's life
I am at home. Don't come with me.
You stay home too.

I will be standing in the woods
where the old trees
move only with the wind
and then with gravity.
In the stillness of the trees
I am at home. Don't come with me.
You stay home too.

*From The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry
(Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998).
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large and remote corporations. There is no competition among the buyers (supposing there is more than one), who are organized and are “free” to exploit the advantage of low prices. Low prices encourage overproduction, as producers attempt to make up their losses “on volume,” but over production inevitably makes for lower prices. The land-using economies thus spiral downward as the money economy of the exploiters spirals upward.

Among people who wish to preserve things other than money (for instance, every region's native capacity to produce essential goods), there is a growing perception that the global free market economy is inherently an enemy to the natural world, to human health and freedom, to industrial workers, and to farmers.

I believe that this perception is correct and that it can be shown to be correct merely by listing [some of] the assumptions implicit in the idea that

The Broken Ground

The opening out and out,
body yielding body:
the breaking
through which the new
comes, perching
above its shadow
on the piling up
darkened broken old
husks of itself:
bud opening to flower
opening to fruit opening
to the sweet marrow
of the seed —
taken
from what was, from
what could have been.
What is left
is what is.

*From The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry
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corporations should be “free” to buy low and sell high in the world at large. These assumptions include, among others:

- that stable relationships among people, places, and things do not matter....;
- that there is no conflict between greed and ecological or bodily health;

- that there is no conflict between self-interest and public service;
- that the destruction of the capacity anywhere to produce necessary goods does not matter and involves no cost;
- that it is all right for a nation’s or region’s subsistence to be foreign-based, dependent on long-distance transport, and entirely controlled by corporations;
- that an economy is a machine, of which people are merely the interchangeable parts. One has no choice but to do the work (if any) that the economy prescribes, and to accept the prescribed wage;
- that, therefore, vocation is a dead issue. One does not do the work that one chooses to do because one is called to it by Heaven or by one’s natural or God-given abilities, but does instead the work that is determined and imposed by the economy.

If governments have defaulted in protecting people from the “total economy” (as you put it) of the supranational corporations, how are people to protect themselves?

There seems, really, to be only one way, and that is to develop and put into practice the idea of a local economy—something that growing numbers of people are now doing. For several good reasons, they are beginning with the idea of a local food economy. People are trying to find ways to shorten the distance between producers and consumers, to make the connections between the two more direct, and to make this local economic activity a benefit to the local community.

How can advocates get people to support this idea, against the huge power of Walmart, McDonalds, and Philip Morris?

I am assuming that there is a valid line of thought leading from the idea of a total economy to the idea of a local economy. The first thought is that as a consumer in the total economy, one does not know the history of the products that one uses. Where, exactly did they come from? Who produced

them? What toxins were used in their production? What were the human and ecological costs of producing and then disposing of them? One sees that such questions cannot be answered easily. Though one is shopping amid an astonishing variety of products, one is denied certain significant choices. In such a state of economic ignorance, it is not possible to choose products that were produced locally or with reasonable kindness toward people and toward nature.... To be a consumer in the total economy, one must agree to be totally ignorant, totally passive, and totally dependent on distant supplies and self-interested suppliers. And then, perhaps, one begins to see from a local point of view.... Perhaps also one begins to see the difference between a small local business that must share the fate of the local community and a large absentee corporation that is set up to escape the fate of the local community while ruining the local economy.

What are the basic principles of a viable local economy?

So far as I can see, the idea of a local economy rests upon only two principles: neighborhood and subsistence.

In a viable neighborhood, neighbors ask themselves what they can do or provide for one another, and they find answers that they and their place can

afford. This practice must be, in part, charitable, but it must also be economic, and the economic part must be equitable.

Of course, everything needed locally cannot be produced locally. But a viable neighborhood is a community; and a viable community is made up of neighbors who cherish and protect what they have in common. This is the principle of subsistence. A viable community, like a viable farm, protects its own production capacities. It does not import products that it can produce for itself. And it does not export local products until local needs have been met.

The insistence on neighborhood and subsistence will be disparaged by the globalists as “protectionism.”

That’s exactly what it is. But this protectionism is just and sound, because it protects local producers and is the best assurance of adequate supplies to local consumers. And the idea that local needs should be met first and only surpluses exported does not imply any prejudice against charity toward people in other places or trade with them. The principle of neighborhood at home always implies the principle of charity abroad. And the principle of subsistence is in fact the best guarantee of giveable or marketable surpluses. ♦

The Man Born to Farming

*The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down
in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.
His thought passes along the row ends like a mole.
What miraculous seed has he swallowed
that the unending sentence of his love flows out of his mouth
like a vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water
descending in the dark?*

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