

## **LOCALIZATION: PREMISE AND PRÉCIS**

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5 April 2011

In popular discussion, a set of terms is emerging: locavore, adapting-in-place, slow foods, BALLE (business alliance for local living economies), economic gardening, local currency, LOIS (local ownership and import substitution), ecovillages and localism. At the same time, some things are reappearing: farmers markets, granges, community energy systems, backyard gardens and old skills taught to a new generation. Localization is a concept that gives these phenomena a context; it shows where they are coming from and why, as energy supplies tighten in the coming decades, they are important.

### **PREMISE**

The good times we have enjoyed for over a century likely were based on ever-increasing amounts of high-quality energy. If significant amounts of that energy are removed from our complex industrial society then the future may not be prosperous in conventional terms. Localization frames this as a frank premise, one not widely accepted:

1. Industrial society faces a re-emerging biophysical reality, involving an inevitable decrease and, eventually, leveling of high-quality material and energy availability at the same time that the negative consequences of past consumption must be addressed. This reality will negatively affect essential services and institutions (e.g., food systems, health provision, mobility, banking).
2. These circumstances and ensuing effects are, like gravity, not negotiable. They are not altered by political debate or market forces, nor will denial or inattention make them disappear.
3. Conventional tools (e.g., policy-change, pricing, markets, technology, social innovation) may not be up to the task.

We face, not a problem with a solution, but a circumstance demanding a response. An honest appraisal of the consequences of past disruption to climate and soil produces a similar conclusion; we must adapt to a reality that we cannot change.

### **A COHERENT RESPONSE**

Society will experience a transition from the centrifugal forces of globalization (e.g., concentrated economic and political power, cheap and abundant raw materials and energy,

intensive commercialization) toward the centripetal forces of localization: distributed authority and leadership, more sustainable use of natural resources, self-sufficiency, community cohesiveness, an emphasis on the local while retaining regional, national and international dimensions.

The premise is that the coming transition is inevitable. What is not inevitable, however, is the nature of our response. Localization is one plausible response, a process of social change pointing toward localities. Its primary concern is adaptations for living within the limits of nearby natural systems. It focuses on everyday behavior within place-based communities. Simultaneously, because localities are interdependent across scales, localization has regional, national and international dimensions.

Localization is not strictly about the local nor a narrowly-focused localism. Localization is not globalization in reverse. Rather, as overextended economies and resource extraction efforts spend themselves, modern societies will experience a shift from the centrifugal forces of globalization—cheap and abundant raw materials and high-quality energy, intensive commercialization, displaced wastes and concentrated political power—to the centripetal forces of localization—limited ecological sources of energy and materials, an inability to displace true costs in time or space, personal proficiency, community self-reliance, and distributed leadership.

Overall, localization builds on a notion by Antonio Gramsci, a “pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will.” While the energy descent is unalterable, localization is an affirmative response.

There are fascinating, and sometimes unexpected, aspects to localization.

## **BEHAVIORAL SIMPLIFICATION**

Unexpectedly, the premise of localization may unburden us. To understand this outcome consider this recent claim that people will not simplify their lives.

*We can't get out of the box just by cutting back on our energy use. Yes, conservation is essential. But modern human societies are buzzing hives of technological and social complexity, and only huge inputs of high-quality energy can create and sustain this complexity. Most of us don't want radically simpler lives, because they'd be poorer lives in countless ways. So we need energy, lots of it – and we need new carbon-free sources. (Homer-Dixon, The Globe and Mail, 18 March 2011)*

In a previous business-as-usual period, people's unwillingness to change would have presented a significant barrier. It would have forced us to either pursue Homer-Dixon's task of finding new carbon-free energy sources and/or continue with increased vigor our decades-

long effort to get people to dramatically reduce their consumption. Neither has had success of late.

However, while people may not choose to simplify their lives (although even this is debatable), the premise of localization is that soon there will be no other choice. Dismal though this might sound, it may make the transition easier. Educators, activists and researchers no longer will need to persuade people to change behavior. People no longer will have to judge what arguments are more convincing. Instead, the biophysical reality and required responses will be directly perceivable, palpable and tangible. The reasons for downshifting behavior will be blatantly obvious, with the motivation for such change provided, not by others, but by interaction of the new reality and human self-interest.

If events unfold as the premise suggests, particularly if the energy descent is somewhat rapid, then we will no longer need to struggle to get our fellow citizen's attention. Indeed, the public will call upon experts of all types to help formulate a response. And the local expertise that is present in all citizens will need to be leveraged creatively, and quickly. We may wish we had more time to prepare. Fortunately, we can pre-figure a response.

### **PRE-FAMILIARIZATION**

When discussing behavior change it is often claimed that people anchor to the status quo, seem immune to scientific evidence and allow emotion to have too powerful an effect on future choices. Conceivably these tendencies pose a dilemma for localization. After all, we will need to make far-reaching changes, away from the status quo, toward an unfamiliar life pattern and all in quick fashion. However, the issue here is not a status quo bias but a familiarity bias, an issue linked to our mental model of a situation. This provides hope since mental models can be altered.

A strategy to use here is pre-familiarization. Since people are conceptual animals, what they can become familiar with is, fortunately, not limited to what they have experienced in a direct and literal sense. We can incubate pre-familiarization through indirect experiences. Consider the powerful effect of stories, artistic creations, simulations and practice of various kinds (e.g., plays, games, apprenticeships) and observation of alternative living patterns (e.g., living museums, ecovillages). These all help people to build mental models of the not yet present. Direct experience is also effective with transition town workshops, farmers markets and CSAs providing exposure to elements of a localized community. Pre-familiarization can help people to feel at home in a place they have not yet inhabited.

### **MOTIVATION FROM EMBEDDED BENEFITS**

Leopold's land ethic is well known. But he also suggested the less appreciated conservation aesthetic. This aesthetic involves satisfaction derived from the hidden riches of responding to, and living within, biophysical limits. This form of motivation easily goes unnoticed, yet

examples of innately fulfilling efforts at sustainable living, shared transportation, local food provisioning and cooperative housing are springing up all over.

To localize well demands that we change everyday behaviors. Many of us will need to develop new competencies, creatively solve energy and resource problems and develop new ways of interacting. Fortunately, humans find the related pursuit of competence, frugality and participation to be intrinsically satisfying. This may be particularly true when we are tackling problems that are genuine and meaningful. Simply put, the creative efforts necessary for effective response to the emerging biophysical reality contain their own rewards.

But localization may offer an even deeper version of this motivation. One form of human greatness is living *life-as-a-work-of-art*. Transitioning to a less energy-intensive existence will require that we weave together new and old skills, behaviors, values and goals. As we do so, there will be opportunities for us to reflect at the end of day, or week, or month, on the beauty of our accomplishments. Localization may entail more ordinary days but extraordinary outcomes and reflections.