

A Tale of Two Cities

By Helena Norberg-Hodge

Around the world, two opposing forces are contending to define our future. On one side are those working for a new economy – one that is more equitable, decentralized, and attuned to the needs of people and nature. On the other, are the forces behind corporate globalization and its consolidation of political and economic power. While thousands of people have braved the winter cold and pepper spray to alert the world to the plight of the 99%, our governments are still forging ahead with destructive de-regulatory treaties. The latest of these comes in the form of a new Trans Pacific Partnership, which will further line the pockets of the 1%, while increasing redundant trade and CO2 emissions.

After three decades of studying the impacts of globalization on cultures around the world, I am convinced that focusing on the re-regulation of trade and finance is the path towards creating a more just and sustainable economy. Because it runs counter to the interests of the powerful corporations and banks, this can sound more daunting than it really is: once people recognize that economic deregulation lies behind not only global warming and toxic pollution, but also poverty, unemployment and societal conflict then the groundswell of public pressure could turn the tide.

To see the effects of globalization and its antidote, it's helpful to look at what has been happening in two very different parts of the world: Beijing and Detroit. About 15 years ago, I visited rural China, and found that despite decades of Maoism, the people I encountered were able to meet most of their basic needs locally, using their own labor and ingenious small-scale technologies. In the villages, we were greeted with spontaneous laughter and humor, simple but delicious food, and examples of vibrant, intergenerational cooperation.

When I visited China again a few years ago, while shooting footage for our documentary film, *The Economics of Happiness*, much had changed. Thanks to global trade agreements, Western corporations and banks had moved their operations there, in search of cheap labor and lax environmental standards. As a result China's cities had grown at a furious rate: Beijing's population alone to

about 20 million. Many villagers had been drawn into the cities by the siren song of a ‘modern life’ offered by these supposed opportunities. Among those with “good” jobs in a TNC-linked factory, the work week ran 80 hours or more; the rest struggled to feed themselves and their families on meager and inconsistent wages. According to GDP, people had prospered, but living amid Beijing’s grimy streets, gridlocked traffic and choking pollution, their quality of life had actually declined. Meanwhile the gap between rich and poor was widening dramatically.

This wasn’t good news for the environment either. Far from being more efficient, urbanization causes per capita resource use to rise dramatically. When people are concentrated in a high-rise world of cement, steel and plastic, every need – food, water, building materials – has to be met from outside, requiring massive investments in infrastructure, along with huge amounts of fossil fuel for transport.

On the other side of the planet, the city of Detroit is moving in the opposite direction. Having tied its economy to the fate of the auto industry, Detroit suffered a steady loss of jobs as global competition and outsourcing led to factory closures – another symptom of globalization. But when our film team went there five years ago, we found a grassroots revolution underway. Tucked into streets lined with empty houses, drug lairs and crumbling factories, nearly 200 community gardens had sprouted up. These green oases provided a gathering place for community members, encouraging a sense of sharing, cooperation and belonging, and providing a vital link to the natural world. Today Detroit boasts more than 2,000 urban agriculture projects, each one helping to bring life back into the heart of the city.

In villages, towns and big cities throughout the industrialized world, a whole host of initiatives are helping to rebuild local economies, reconnecting people with each other and the earth. The importance of this fledgling movement should not be underestimated: while the Occupy activists are asking fundamental questions about the nature of our economic system, these locally-based projects are beginning to demonstrate a tangible alternative: *localization*.

Localization doesn’t mean ending trade or producing everything we need at the village level; it simply means meeting as many of our needs as close to home as

possible. This not only reduces energy use and greenhouse gas emissions; it also fosters wellbeing. The smaller scale of local production means less pollution, and a healthier living environment. Localization also builds a foundation for psychological wellness by providing a sense of belonging to place and community. Another strength of localization is its adaptability: unlike the globalizing model being imposed worldwide, there is no single blueprint for localization that can be applied everywhere; instead it reflects the diversity of place and people.

Going local on a global scale would require several key steps: first, it's vital that society determines the rules for business, rather than vice versa. 'Free trade' treaties have freed global business from oversight by communities, regions, and even nation states. We have to insist that our governments get back to the same tables where they signed our rights away – this time to agree that businesses need to be place-based or localized, making them more accountable to those they affect. Second, subsidies need to be shifted. Rather than promoting the large and global, we need to begin supporting the small and local instead. For example, phasing out subsidies for energy and technology – and using the money saved to decrease payroll taxes – would dramatically reduce both CO2 emissions and unemployment. These kinds of policy shifts would also help stem the destructive tide towards urbanization in developing countries.

In the end, the trajectory of change in China may yet catch up with that of Detroit. Just a 45-minute drive from Beijing lie the ruins of “Wonderland”, a never-completed theme park once slated to be the largest amusement park in Asia. Today, the 100-acre site looks like a dystopian Disneyland, complete with abandoned “castles”, faux medieval villages, and skeletal hotels. But like the urban gardeners of Detroit, farmers from a nearby village are already reclaiming the land, growing food in the shadow of a potent symbol of the excesses of globalization.