
Robert Wolf argues that the true solution to our (mal)development problem is found in the agricultural city. How does one combine a regional identity with political empowerment? Wolf suggests that a loose network of de-centered participatory institutions - think land trusts, conservation easements, community banks and local currencies, renewable energy and worker owned cooperatives - will be the key to a more productive, creative and resilient alternative to corporate globalization.

This might remind one of Elinor Ostrom's work (the first woman in 2008 to win the Nobel Economics Prize) who argued that cooperation is not only more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable than competition, but is often more efficient and productive too.

How could that be? Well, when communities choose to perceive their ongoing exchange of goods and services as not just atomized interactions but as part of longer term relationship then it makes sense to look at how best to restructure the economy in a more collective commonwealth fashion. (For more on this, I suggest reading John Restakis' great book, Humanizing the Economy, Cooperatives in the Age of Capital, which Wolf also references)

Of course, those building a better world around a mutual aid economy can not rest on their laurels. Without oversight and accountability these “alternative” institutions can also be corrupted.

Those of us who were at Standing Rock last year with indigenous water protectors will never forget that the State Bank of North Dakota used public money to finance the crackdown against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) Protest. Same goes for supposed farmer co-op like Land O'Lakes that are actually working against their own members by pushing force trade deals like the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) that allow them to import cheaper dairy byproducts rather than pay a fair market price for fresh domestic milk.

The ultimate challenge for those trying to create an agricultural city in the Driftless bioregion or anywhere else, the challenge lies not just within transforming people’s own heart and minds. There are also powerful external forces - the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) come to mind - that will work hard to crush such effort, especially if it were to provide an inspiration for other oppressed communities. Effective grassroots solidarity between bioregional communities and across artificial borders will then be the true test for sustaining such a project into the future.

In Building the Agricultural City, Wolf demonstrates the need for rural Americans to work cooperatively to create self-reliant, decentralized economies. Designed as a tool to promote collaborative economic development, Wolf and several Iowa and Wisconsin collaborators are working to develop tools and systems to give the Driftless region greater self-sufficiency.

Wolf addresses the constraints that must be faced in the design of a self-reliant economy and uses Building the Agricultural City to focus on the design process that can increase regional self-sufficiency. Though designed as a tool to promote cooperative economic development in the Driftless region, the model Wolf proposes can be constructed in any region small enough for its people to have a common identity sufficient to encourage collaboration.

Robert Wolf is a prolific writer. His latest work invokes Lewis Mumford and E F Schumacher - among many others - to advocate localism as an antidote to globalization. The book's first half is devoted to laying out the intrinsic contradictions and brutal exploitation of capitalism in many respects, American's Midwest - like the Global South - has been exploited and victimized by outsiders, an ugly process that has been going on ever since Columbus blundered onto the shores of this continent and was 'discovered' indigenous peoples. Sadly, even as our communities languish under this extractive and waspish development problem, the history of urban farming will know this is not such a oxymoron - even Charlemagne mandatated that gardens and livestock be kept within city walls as a medieval variant of what we would call today food sovereignty.

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