

The Glocal Crisis and the Politics of Change

David Fasenfest
Wayne State University

The term 'glocal' seems to have originated in business circles, often attributed to the Japanese business practice of expanding global enterprise by focusing on local conditions. Of late it also comes to mean how local actors can organize activities in the locality to counter the effects of globalization on economic and social vitality. Some may worry that glocalization runs the risk of generalizing the global into the local to defuse local cultural differences, and indeed the increased migration flows between more and less developed countries, the ever expanding internationalization and standardization of consumption, and the uniformity of cultural symbols that threatens local variation and undermines the intergeneration transmission of social practices and norms are a threat. That is, as global capital tries to appropriate local differences in the quest for sales the consequence is a bleeding and blending of those differences into international products.

But glocal also evokes oppositional politics, the politics of local first by recognizing that in the middle of this globalizing process the locality can assert itself. It means advocating for the consumption of locally produced food to support farmers in the area over crops shipped half-way around the world. It means looking at the local content of production in the goods we purchase, especially those that have a small ecological footprint and promote sustainability. It means simply drinking coffee at the locally owned and operated coffee house and passing on the many outlets of corporate coffee purveyors that seem to pop up everywhere. Implicit in this effort is a desire to retain local character as well as support local economies to withstand the vagaries of global standardization. Ritzer warns us of the process of standardized reduction in quality of all things in our economic and social world when he points out that 'McDonaldization ... is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.' (1993: 1)

The cultural challenge is well summed up by looking at an innovative art project out of Canada which tries to tackle the ubiquity of images and to form unique and (as their name implies) locally focused representations of the collectivity out of individual visions.

The Glocal Project is a collaborative, multifaceted artist-led project that examines the changing role of digital image making today. The digital revolution has included the global proliferation of millions of image-taking devices (such as digital cameras, video recorders, cell phones, and PDAs) and the sharing of billions of images through online networking and archival sites (such as Flickr). As this democratization of digital technologies makes the ability to make photographic images so ubiquitous, Glocal is interested in looking at the implications of the changing roles and relations of images within the field of visibility. Glocal is particularly interested in exploring the construction and relevance of the 'unique' or 'originary' image in relation to the multiple or 'multitude'. (Glocal Project 2009)

They go on to assert their role in community building by examining 'the shifting nature of "community" in the digital age ... how global frameworks can reshape conceptions of local identities. It also encourages local voices to assert themselves globally, by contributing individual points of view to a vast, visual undertaking.' (Glocal Project 2009)

One of the main themes of this effort to engage social change in response to global changes is to organize on a local level. Detroit has a growing urban food initiative in which local community groups capitalize on the increasingly barren urban landscape (see White forthcoming) of a city that had at its peak a very low density (Detroit is a city comprising 138 square miles, and by some estimates almost half of the physical space is abandoned). Other cities and environs, notably the areas in southern Chicago and into north-western Indiana, have experimented with local gardening as a replacement activity after the decline of its manufacturing base – focusing on food production to augment nutritional intake of poor residents, engaging in commercial activities through farmer's markets, making deals with local flower wholesalers to purchase locally produced flowers that are pollinated by locally kept bee populations producing honey for market. Local growing and local buying covers a wide range of activities from raising and selling heritage turkeys during the holidays to the increasing desire to follow kosher laws about animal raising and slaughter, all focused to some degree with resisting or rejecting the global marketplace.

This initiative is reminiscent of an earlier desire to escape the tedium of conventional wisdom and embark on a re-visioning of the lived environment. Begun in large part by a reaction to the modernist architectural styles emerging in the early 1930s but really taking hold in the vast rebuilding efforts after the Second World War, the movement came to be known as Team 10 and encompassed architects and urbanists, anthropologists and economists, sociologists and simply students of society seeking to expand and enhance the human experience (for a comprehensive compendium of essays describing this movement see Risselada and Van den Heuvel 2006). The reconstruction in this post-war environment begged for something other than a return to what many felt were dehumanizing structures and spaces not designed to promote human interaction and development. At its peak in the three decades starting in 1953, this loosely defined movement crafted essays and created designs for living that challenged the full range of assumptions about what was possible and what was necessary.

What brings this effort to mind is that the desolation of our urban spaces – most notably in Detroit – again begs for new visions of what would constitute success and a careful analysis of how the failure offers new opportunities, and not just reflective analyses of how it

came to pass (see Sugrue 1996 for careful reconstruction of Detroit's history). A city like Rotterdam, destroyed by the end of the war, was an open canvas for new ideas in both living arrangements as well as the architecture that defined and confined how people live. Detroit is no less of a canvas due to the widespread demolition and the destruction of whole neighborhoods. If the city is to recover it needs more than simply more of the same.

Much as Team 10's efforts raised awareness and perhaps left behind some small examples of what were possible, in all likelihood so will local community initiatives possibly change conditions on the ground for some, but perhaps only for a short while. Urban gardening in Detroit resonates with similar local-food-by-local-grower initiatives around the country. They point to new models, but are they likely to generate new economic and political realities? At this moment perhaps, but they will not necessarily succeed over the long haul. In the case of Detroit one key is the need for more responsive and representative local government. A recent vote to revisit the city charter offers a chance to revise the system of locally elected representatives from at-large to one of representing clearly defined city districts. Chicago, for all its faults, greatly benefits from a system of checks and balances and the ability of community activists to influence their aldermanic representatives. Unlike Detroit's very concentrated urban investment around the downtown area, Chicago has been able to promote a process of linked development with investments in the outlying neighborhoods tied to more desirable investments downtown. If the charter changes perhaps the larger communities throughout the city will stand a chance of infrastructural improvements.

The point here is that local efforts, however valiant, must be tied to political processes that allow for constituent pressures to come to the fore. This is more easily seen in local politics (both the success and failure of these pressures), but less clearly in national politics. The election of Barack Obama was viewed by the millions who supported his campaign and voted for his presidency as just such a change in politics, as a chance to experience grass roots influence on the course of national politics, as a chance to change business as usual and truly experience policies and politics on behalf of people and not corporate global interests. This sort of change is crucial if we hope to grapple with the global forces arrayed that define and limit local outcomes. Global economic and political forces create and overwhelm local realities on the ground and national politics plays a critical role in making this possible – if only because national politics are an integral part of global affairs. Obama's presidency brought hope to a population eager for change that would speak to local conditions and put an end to many of the ravages of this global economy.

We are currently stuck in what some maintain is the difference between the rhetoric of political campaigns and the reality of politics and government. Indeed, rhetoric does not govern and history has shown that lofty ideals have not translated into good government (one can even argue that left and progressive politics is all about what has been wrong and not about what to do since they generally have never had power to govern for much of the era of industrial capitalism). Nevertheless, political reality does not require that Obama follow the centrist path that has marked his administration to date. Our hope is slowly turning to despair as his presidency seems more like business as usual, and by usual I mean nothing more than the kinds of swings we experience as each new administration reverses some of its predecessor's policies and offers a slight ideological shift all the while not changing the core aspects of how decisions are made and by whom.

I will leave for another time the fact that 'centrist' in this country means a moderate rightist, pro-capitalist and pro-business orientation, and stipulate that it is code for staking a position that is in the middle of a basically reactionary country. Having said that, we should not forget that Obama's election 'mandate' exceeded Bush II's and yet Obama seems unwilling to govern. By govern I mean staking out a clear agenda that represents the coalition that elected him and reflects the rhetoric that got him their support. Bush had no qualms doing just that no matter how tenuous that mandate may have been; his ideological goals were clear to him and those around him, and it meant a willingness to force Congressional reconciliation to get his program passed as he carefully and clearly staked out his legislative interests – that is the political reality. Even with more support than Bush had – by that I mean Obama's national approval going into office and his party's control of Congress – Obama consistently refuses to press the agenda he promised to those who elected him. Some maintain that there must be an 'objective' outside view about what to do and when, that the reality of governing requires negotiation and compromise if anything is to get done. Should we accept these limitations as we see a close to Obama's first year in office? Or can we use Obama's campaign rhetoric to inform our expectations of Obama's administration, and through that rhetoric offer a judgment on whether and how well rhetoric translates into political reality?

Clearly the election of Barack Obama was a transformational moment electing a transformational president. It may be incumbent upon him to truly try to serve all the people whenever possible and not focus on the agenda of those who swept him into office. Clearly the office of the presidency represents everyone, but we have a long history of presidents who managed to represent both the particular interests of their constituency and the broad canvas of our political landscape. Many were unabashed in their pursuit of some narrower course of action that reflected a particular perspective. Clinton was a special kind of compassionate conservative who did to the Democratic Party's program of welfare entitlements what Nixon in China did to the Republican Party's anti-communism. These and other presidents used the power and symbolism of their office to give cover to a particular and partisan political agenda – something President Obama fails to, or seemingly refuses to, do.

What we seem to have is a war policy guided by Bush appointees, and in the end Obama now acts much as the losing Republican candidate would have acted. Members of his own party question the war strategy in Afghanistan that promises to consume another \$30 billion dollars each year (cynically the cost of this even watered down health care reform we cannot afford as a nation!). Anyone who thinks the situation on the ground will permit an exit from Afghanistan in August 2011 is no less fooled than those believing nuclear capabilities and WMDs justified open aggression in Iraq. And once the troop build-up has been announced, top generals are now saying this war might take years more to effectively prosecute (whatever that means!). Obama sets out on another act of military adventurism applauded by the right all the while ignoring or dismissing its cost as he talks about limited resources for much needed domestic policies to alleviate the pain at the steadily broadening bottom of our society (see this animated growth of unemployment in <http://cohort11.americanobserver.net/latoyaegwuekwe/multimediafinal.html>).

The Obama administration is filled with the same Clintonian economic specialists and advisers who were the architects of the dismemberment of fiscal constraints and oversight carried out in the name of unleashing economic growth. The Bush administration and 'too big to fail' financial institutions embraced these new liberties with results that were and still are a calamity for most of us. It is to those same advisers Obama now hands over the reins of an 'economic recovery' that has poured additional untold billions into banks that raise our rates and cut off our credit, and that now spend millions to lobby against any new legislative restraints that might protect the people who voted for Obama. These are advisers who cannot conceive of a better way of doing business.

Obama's election brought hope, and indeed hope is a powerful currency. We are not criticizing Obama for what he has failed to accomplish in the face of our expectations. We are criticizing Obama for what he has done in the face of and response to the challenges presented his administration since taking office, in the decisions he makes or opportunities for change he passes up in the name of political reality. He marches to Afghanistan but refuses to take a moral and political stand on meaningful health care reform and abortion rights. He recants on undoing the harm done to our constitutional rights under Bush/Cheney and so far seems to cater to the more nativist anti-immigrant tendencies of this xenophobic and right of center society. Obama talks about the importance of job creation and the rights of workers, and yet his policies defend financial gains. He is quick to require workers to contribute to recovery with pay cuts and concessions while he does little about the excesses of banks. Even Britain and France have expressed their outrage over post-rescue announced bank and financial bonuses by proposing a 50 percent tax on those bonuses all the while Obama waits for banks and bankers to do the 'right thing' by eschewing the greed that seemingly continues unabated (as I write the last of the bail-out banks are seeking to return those funds in order to avoid oversight on bonuses to be paid).

So, at what point are the political realities of this president an excuse or explanation for the failures of his agenda? Our frustrations are not over what has not yet happened but rather the policy initiatives to date. The problem is that these policy initiatives and outcomes are ones he supported and/or promoted. It is too easy to dismiss criticism of Obama by stating that we expect too much. We need to bring the same sort of passion that elected Obama and put pressure on Congress and this administration if we are to retain any hope for progressive change, and maintain the momentum of his candidacy and not support the morbidity of his presidency. Without a change in the direction of government expected by so many who supported Obama all the local initiatives will simply be additions to the historical record of community self-help and survival in hard times, and for as long as those hard times lasted.

We begin this issue with a debate on the role of the left and the meaning of the Obama presidency. In his keynote address, given at the *Critical Sociology* Conference last August 2009 in San Francisco, Bob Newby discusses the importance of Obama's election in the face of our country's history of racism and what he calls white nationalism. Arguing that Obama's epoch changing election was the result of a coalition of progressive forces who have redefined the question of race supporting a candidate who embodied the new multi-racial reality in American politics, he calls for patience as Obama is a pragmatic and

political realist bringing change as quickly as politically feasible. In her response, Martha Gimenez stresses the class nature (and failure) of this administration, focusing instead on a critical assessment of the main arguments raised by Obama during his campaign. Gimenez concludes that so long as Obama is timid about tackling the real question of race in this country, and ignores the importance of class politics, there is little to be expected from an Obama administration.

The remaining articles of this issue offer insight into how we understand our society, its structures, and the relationship between the environment and potentials for social change in the rest of the world. Ossewaarde begins his analysis by revisiting what he calls the 'identity crisis' in sociology as a field, and argues that a true dialectical sociology has if not disappeared then at least receded from current theorizing about society. Returning to C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner for inspiration, Ossewaarde renews the call for a serious return to a dialectical sociology and posits that the new turn in public sociology and other recent trends would benefit from his reconstructed dialectical approach. Chakrabarti and Thakur embark on a voyage re-examining what is commonly referred to as the informal sector in developing countries to show how its definition rests squarely within the mainstream development paradigm. As a result, activities in this sector are devalued when compared with the formal sector and the outcome is to support a transition to modern capitalism. In its place they offer an alternative analysis that unmasks this pro-capitalist agenda and offers new insights into the importance of this sector.

This issue concludes with articles by Petras and Veltmeyer revisiting indigenous movements in the context of the global ecological crisis, and by Jorgenson on the role of globalization and world economic integration on the particular ecological devastation brought by deforestation in developing countries. In the first Petras and Veltmeyer argue that a retreat from an analysis informed by the works of Marx seriously hinders the ability to properly assess the importance, nature and interrelationship of these two events. In part informed by Marx, Jorgenson empirically examines the pattern of investment flows and the role of exports to reveal how externalizing environmental costs by developing nations leads to increased ecological harm. In short, as developing nations become more integrated in the global economy, ecological damage – in this case the rate of deforestation – follows.

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