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Seven Good Reasons to Say "Locality"¹

If we submit the world "locality" to the litmus test of the word "hunger," we find that it is valid for at least seven good reasons, which means that it is impossible to face the problem of hunger if we do not take into account the question of "locality."

I have reflected for years on this issue, on this constant creation of hunger and misery which, produced primarily by land expropriation, has characterized capitalist development since its origins.

Today, in the Empire, there are 800 million people who are hungry, and 1 billion and 200 million who are malnourished. Such an extensive and relentless production of hunger must be at the center of our reflection on "how to organize against the Empire." This is especially true at a time when this problem is being raised with urgency and determination by many social movements in the First as well as the Third World, looking for ways to guarantee a material and spiritual life.

Without land to cultivate there is no nourishment. Without nourishment there are no bodies. The bodies die. We cannot engage in bio-politics without confronting this problem; even in the "exodus" we still will have to eat.

Thus, any importance given to society-creation and political re-composition that looks at the landing sites must always be coupled with the giving of equal importance to society-creation, cooperative production, and the construction of bio-politics looking at the places of origin, without fear that this may lend itself to nostalgic or romantic positions. What would this mean, anyway? Could we have such fears if, by a sudden *diktat*, we were expelled from our apartments and deprived, on top of it, from the possibility of getting any food? Would we consider nostalgic and romantic the will to resist and return to our previous situation?

Thus, the importance given to the desire for mobility of work must be coupled with an equal concern for the right to resist, and cooperation with those who have landed must be coupled with cooperation with those who have never left and resist the violence of uprooting and displacement.

I consider now seven good reasons why we need to insist on the concept of "locality," while "an Empire that is everywhere and nowhere" seems to prospect, even among militants, the indifference to locality as the only possible dimension. Is this the only possible dimension or this too must be coupled with its opposite, the appreciation for the locality, depending on the issues at stake?

The **first good reason** to insist on the concept of locality is that the **broad interventions on the land and the populations** that have characterized the origins of capitalist development appear as **constant and crucial** components in the politics of structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund, during the last two decades, on the governments of the South of the world, and in the World Banks' projects which constitute their complements. While these politics, imposed in a particularly uncompromising way since the 1980s, have more and more lowered the standards of living of the population, the World Bank's projects have always rooted the

¹ Intervention on the occasion of the debate **Critical Paths for a Second Cycle of Global Struggles**. A Discussion starting from the books *No Logo* by Naomi Klein and *Empire* by A. Negri and M.Hart, and the presentation of the book *Counterempire* by A. Negri et al. At the festival of Radio Sherwood held in Padova on July 10, 2002.

maximization of profit on gigantic demolitions of the fundamental means of social reproduction in the contexts in which they have been applied.

The interventions to which I refer are, on one side, the privatization and expropriation of land and, on the other, the uprooting, expulsion, and even fencing off, of the populations--fencing off, first of all, in refugee camps and shelters for immigrants or in more or less hidden concentration camps in a war situation--just to mention the first three example examples. Due to the great war projects/enterprises, to the agricultural modernization projects, exemplified by the various phases of the Green Revolution (of which GM seeds represents the last development), due to investment projects, like the construction of mega dams or roads, and to projects directly aiming at the resettlement of populations (among the most explicit being the *Transmigrasi* in Indonesia), there are is a constant accumulation of land, on one side, and expelled populations on the other. By means of war, land is accumulated, and populations are uprooted just by making the land non-cultivable due to the presence in it of war-ammunitions (an increasingly infinite damage, for an infinite time, for an expulsion without return).

Starting from the 1980s, these interventions, coupled with the policies typical of harsh adjustment, have caused an unprecedented poverty across the world. What we are witnessing is a planetary master plan of underdevelopment of social reproduction, finalized to the development of the new neo-liberal global economy. It hardly needs to be mentioned here that all of this has been in response to the cycle of struggle of the 1960s and 1970s which, as Negri underlie in his *Impero e Controimpero*, the topic of this debate-- blocked the mechanisms of the reproduction of capitalist society, founded on the fordist, or better, the Keynesian compromise that had prevailed for about thirty years.

From the recurrence and crucial role of these interventions in the politics of the organisms that regulate global finance and therefore the modalities of development, we deduce that in post-fordist accumulation as well --which presumably accumulates information, social relations and affections--what is being accumulated, no less than five centuries ago, is first of all land, on one side, and, on the other, impoverished individuals expropriated from the means of production and reproduction, starting with the land.

Thus land accumulation and the expulsion of populations remain, together with war, fundamental operations intended to reorganize the world, give new foundations to class relations and stratify labor.

It is evident that, if free cultivable lands are not much available, nor are jobs, in a number corresponding to the number of those expelled, and citizenship rights are also not available, then expulsion from the land is the equivalent for many of a death sentence.

But if these interventions continue to be constant and crucial factors from a capitalist viewpoint, then, it is important that we also **assume their crucial character from the point of view of the struggle against the Empire**. Let's pay attention then to the right to resist beside the right to escape.

Precisely because the lesson taught by this type of death sentence has been learned in the remotest corners of the planet, the **right to resistance has resulted more and more in numerous organizational efforts**. This is the good second reason to insist on the concept of locality.

This implies the need **to respect and cooperate with the choices and decisions** that derive from the consciousness that it is unconceivable to go anywhere else, because there is often not other place to go. Not surprisingly, the most ephemeral aspect of the great dam projects is the part concerning the resettlement of the populations affected, because there are no other fields available for cultivation in the area. Outside of that cultivable area there is no possibility of exodus,

neither material nor interior. For the overwhelming majority of the uprooted population there is only the misery of the urban peripheries, where usury vultures are waiting for them, to take their children as slaves or to take them to the brothels, as well as traffickers in human flesh, including human organs.

In this context, the resistance of the tribal people of the Narmada Valley (India), who declare that they prefer to let themselves drown in the water, if the works for the dam proceed, rather than move, represents this consciousness, beside the determination to continue to live in their own economic and cultural environment, against the violence of displacement and the annihilation destiny imposed by the interests and profits of the global economy.

A second example, even more significant because full of further implications, is the resistance of the Chikpo women on the slopes of the Himalaya. International companies arrive planning to install sawing outfits to cut down a good part of the forest which, together with agriculture and cattle raising, represents the food, reproduction, and life system of these communities. The companies try to entice the women with the prospect of the money the family will earn through the jobs that will open up for the men. But the women refuse it and organize pickets, hugging the trees in the night to prevent the loggers from cutting them down. They explicitly refuse the possibility of receiving money saying that they don't need jobs to live. They already have what they need to live. This reminds me of the protests organized, five centuries ago, by the farmers in England against the fencing off of the communal lands. They too were saying that they did not need to go to work in the manufacturing workshops to be able to live. The story repeats itself, but now it is globally understood. The Chikpo women also refuse the determination of a gap between the female and male conditions, between those who have money and those who don't. But, above all, they refuse to be enslaved by the money economy, to commit one's life to the uncertainty of this economy, the more so in its neo-liberal version. One day, when the work will be finished, the sawing machine will go and, then, neither the jobs nor the forest--a guarantee of nourishment and habitat--will be there, but, instead, there will be displacement and hunger.

The old dilemma, whether the village was or was not functional to the capitalist economy because, after all, it absorbed the cost of the reproduction of labor when this was not directly engaged in the wage economy, has been resolved. Capitalist development is destroying all the villages. But the villages are organizing, more and more, against capital and its Empire, defending a sphere of life, a possibility of nourishment, and a dwelling and social context that do not depend exclusively on money.

For us here what are our villages, our forests, our commons, and our alternative economies to defend or to set up? What are our *other* relationships that give us some guarantee and which we do not want to see destroyed? This is question to which I will return, when I discuss the sixth and seventh "good reasons," together with some answers that have already been concretized.

The third good reason to continue to speak of the "locality" is the most notorious, perhaps, and this is the need to preserve our **bio-diversity**, which is also a guarantee of good nutrition and better food safety. In the variety of species resides a multiplicity of nutritive substances, so that if a species sickens others remain. Bio-diversity characterizes one locality and not another one, but to preserve it we must maintain economic, social, and cultural network supporting its survival and accessibility. By relying on the natural abundance represented by bio-diversity, and adopting biological methods of cultivation, whose cost they could sustain, entire populations, just a few decades ago, could be self-sufficient. Instead, the Green Revolution, with its need for large scale agriculture and chemical inputs and, more recently, bio-technological (GM) ones, has brought hunger not only to those expelled from the land but also to those who have

remained on the land but at the dependence of the agribusiness companies. Suffice to say that over the last three years, in India, 20,000 farmers have committed suicide because they could not pay the debts they had contracted to buy seeds and pesticides. Export oriented monocultures, at the expense of other species that are destroyed by the "advanced" farming methods, also generates hunger, illness, and invalidity. It is famous the case of the *batua*, a small plant rich in vitamin A, whose elimination by herbicides is the cause of the blindness of many children in India.

The fourth good reason consists in the right to **dwelling stability**. Without it there is no **agriculture**, insofar as activity and as knowledge exchange between humanity and the land. And without agriculture, as we said at the beginning, there is no nourishment. The bodies die. Many famines derive from population resettlements. This is true also of the present famine in Angola, where resettlements have been caused by war. Once resettled in another area the farmers can no longer sow nor harvest, nor perform any of the intermediary activities.

But many other needs are included in the affirmation of the right to dwelling stability, a basic right and also the center of the network of relations around which an essential part of our material and immaterial reproduction is built. At that address friends can find us or can send us a letter. Not surprisingly, one of the most significant struggles carried out by **slum dwellers in Bhopal**, before being hit by the toxic cloud of the Union Carbide was that to have an address. To have a legally recognized address (the *putta*) meant to have some title to the few square meters of land on which the barrack in which one lived was built. It meant having a means to defend oneself against slum demolitions, and to have a guarantee, though often violated, against the evictions decided by the government. It allowed people to get a paper entitling them to obtain some basic goods sold at subsidized prices (similarly, in the United States, you cannot receive a welfare check or credit cards if you do not have an address). For those uprooted from the villages, the **demand for an address** affirmed, again, **the right to be rooted in a locality, this time in the city**.

The fifth good reason is that **food resources must be locally available** at all levels--"community, region, nation"--as numerous organizations of women, coming from various countries of the South, are demanding. **The denial of this right is a key component of the politics of the World Bank** that, for decades, has been thwarting this goal. The Sudanese knew very well how to store food for times of famine. They preserved grains, for decades, by keeping under mounds of soil. This was true biotechnological wisdom! The World Bank, instead, even today, is asking the countries of the South to dismantle their public food reserves, and let the markets deal with emergencies. It claims that it is more convenient (from whose viewpoint?) if the stronger countries, that have food surpluses, take care of it. This means that multinational companies will accumulate more profits. Above all, aid will come, as usual, too late, after a good part of the population will already have been left to die, as it is still happening now in Angola; (but this is a shortcut frequently adopted to resolve the "demographic problem"); mistakes will be made as to who gets the food, the "food aid" will hide genetically modified grains, though they have already proven to be health hazards (like those forbidden in the United States and the European Union but recently sent to Bolivia, Guatemala, and Nicaragua). And the aid will be granted under heavy conditionalities, as is often the case, and will further ruin the local production and the local trade. The alternative to all this absurdity takes us back to the locality, to local production and trade (not, of course, the production carried out by a multinational that has set itself up there), as the source of the foodstuff to be stored. It takes us back to the locality as the place where to store the food, and to local knowledge concerning the methods of storage. At the very least, the local methods already available and tested must represent the first means of comparison if others have to be introduced. Storing food under mounds of soil is certainly wiser than setting up silos that melt in the desert.

Moreover, the first food reserve is obviously represented by the possibility, on the side of the farmers, of selecting, planting, maintaining, and replanting, year after year, the seeds from the previous crop, contrary to the claim of the big agribusiness companies producers of GM, that force the farmers to buy the seeds every years, persecute them by accusing them of having illegally used GM seeds, and carry our genetic mutations, so that sterile seeds are generated (like Terminator) to guarantee the purchase. **The strategy of the globalization of hunger has reached its peak. It has produced the science of sterility.**

The last two reasons refer to the necessity to take into account the **organizational efforts** and networks that in the Third World as in the First or, to put in other words, in the various **Souths and Norths of the world**. have been built **starting** from the **food question**, that is, the question of "**what is to be done**" to avoid hunger and to have a good nutrition. These **networks**, in my view, have a **double aspect**. On one side, they aim to defend the local context, territory, and population, from the devastation and degradation decreed by the global economy, as a premise for displacement. In this sense, we could say that they aim to relocalize development. On the other side, precisely because of the alternative character of the efforts that are being made, they represent, in my view, the first level of a great exodus. They are networks aiming to connect a set of organizational realities which, in open challenge to the "agricultural modernization" so far implemented, the more so in its neo-liberal, globalized version, are carrying on, with a great capacity for connectedness, the project of a different agriculture as the foundation for a different social project. The various connected realities articulate, in fact, their discourses around a set of fundamental themes, starting from the right to keep their food traditions and their cultures. There are also community networks, developed in the advanced countries, which guaranteeing, through different economies and other relations, "spirit and life," escape the despotism and the death sentences, by despondence and isolation, decreed by the various agents of the Empire. These experiences that promote, meanwhile, a vast social transformation concerning important matters, are today increasingly interconnected with moments of struggle, of which the case of Argentina is one of the most significant.

A prerequisite, in fact, to be able to face, in the best way, all the battles ahead, is to be alive, to be strong, and to have eaten well.

The sixth good reason, then, why we should insist on the concept of locality is that, starting from the **various Souths of the world**, in the 1980s, the years of the drastic adjustment and, consequently, the great bread riots, stretching from Latin America to Asia and acquiring a new vigor in the 1990s, **a great movement has formed to regain access to the land**, and obviously also to the water that runs in its veins and to its resources. Access to the land means, first of all, the possibility of having **access to food**. In this sense, vast **farmers' networks** have formed, more recently joined by **fishermen's networks**. These are networks that, in my view, represent the best novelty, one truly pregnant with a different future. The **Via Campesina**, which appeared on the scene in 1992 and formed in 1993, is among the most significant and substantial among these networks. The realities connected by it, 70 organizations, qualify it as a transcontinental network where the issues raised by the organizations of the South have soon found a correspondence with those of the organizations of the North, which have also become part of it. The overall discourse that characterizes this "network of networks," adopted over the last years as a flag by the farmers' movement, is that of **food sovereignty**. It is articulated in **a set of points all relating to the question of locality**. They are the foundation of **the universal right to food, to life, and the quality of life**. Access to land obviously means the possibility to cultivate it for the subsistence of the communities living on it. But stress is also placed on the will to cultivate it according to biological criteria, so that people can benefit from the nutritional diversity that bio-diversity offers.

Thus, access to land means **the right to produce one's food in all the varieties that are possible in that locality and context**. It means variety of food, no longer as an elite privilege but as a right for all, and as the guarantee of a better nutrition and a better health. It **means nutritional freedom** as the other face of **nutritional democracy**. Thus, it means different discourses and practices with regard to agriculture, food production, and trade, sustainable from an economic, social, and environmental viewpoint. These are the foundations of **a different nutritional project for a different life**. They are different economies against a global economy, and against an imperial *diktat* that condemn us to a nutritional homogeneization which, for the majority, involves poor nutrition and poor health; condemn us also to a purely industrial production of food, likely to be exported or imported, but for many impossible to acquire; and also condemn us to the specialization of cultivations by geographical areas in the neo-liberal internationalization of the markets. Local economies and networks aiming, instead, to safeguard the variety and physical integrity of the various species against their destruction and genetic manipulation, which are a source of misery and risks for the population. Networks that oppose the privatization of the common goods, like water, seeds, that represent vital resources for everybody. This, in my view, are **revolutionary positions** because, by carrying an **alternative project**, they oppose **the undermining and capitalization of the mechanisms that reproduce life**, which constitute the most **crucial terrain** of the **present capitalist strategy of hunger**, which, in turn, serves to give new foundation to the class relation and stratify work. On the other side, these underminings and capitalizations constitute the crucial terrain for the multitude, for here is the ground of struggle for the possibility, quality, and freedom of human reproduction. The basic tenets of these networks are, in my view, the **constitutive points for a different project**. On these matters, **the most revolutionary positions turn out to be truly the most conservative**.

The seventh good reason to say "locality" is **the emergence in the advanced countries themselves**, starting with **the United States, the high levels of the Empire**, of **networks** which represent a set of very broad experiences, these too frequently originating from the 1980s, but remarkably consolidated and widened in the following decade, or born in the 1990s and usually defined as **"social ecology," "bio-regionalism," "communitarian economy."**

In the United States, against the devastations produced in the social fabric by the global economy and a federal government that, in the decades we mentioned, increasingly left its workers in the street, without a roof, food, and assistance, a movement has taken off. It consists of a set of self-organizing initiatives intended to establish, first of all, new relations among people and among these and the land (for cultivation, habitation, and public space), and trying, meanwhile, to relocalize, to keep at the community level, or at the region or city level, resources, goods, capacities, professional abilities, and also money that people did not want to see swallowed by the uncontrollable kingdom of the global economy/finance, at the expense of the possibility and quality of life of the local communities. This is why these initiatives are also considered part of an overall movement **to relocalize development**, which is meant **to strengthen and revitalize** the economic and social context of that locality, against the alternative of abandoning to a destiny of degradation and impoverishment, with the frequent corollary of isolation and dislocation for its inhabitant.

I will briefly mention it, focussing above all on the emergence of those networks which, in the United States, **have made of nutrition their battle ground, similar in this** to those we have seen **in the countries of the South**. It is a very broad movement, which was born to challenge the consequences of the present model of agro-industrial development and which tries, in the meantime, to build alternative forms of life. This movement has become increasingly important in numerous American cities, many of which have been struck by unemployment, with the consequent flight of the supermarkets and the closing of many shops. What characterizes it is that

it oriented towards a biological agriculture at the local level in order **to guarantee food to the community** and, above all, **fresh and genuine food** (the European Union has authorized the irradiation of food, which is a health hazard, in order to preserve it, so that it looks fresh even if it is not). From Binghamton to Detroit, the historic capital of the car industry, and San Francisco, the initiatives geared towards a good nutrition, by opening a new relations between people and the land, have become, at the same time, the engine for the take off of different forms of farming and for the mixing of different culture, promoting the encounter and cooperation between different sectors of the population that, prior to that, had been estranged from each other as, for instance, the citizens of Binghamton and the native Americans residing in the nearby reservations. In san Francisco, Mohammed Neru, the director of the **San Francisco League of Gardeners (SLUG)**, argues that: We are dealing with the entire cycle, not with one problem alone, meaning by "entire cycle," the revitalizing of an impoverished community which cannot rely upon the usual reproduction infrastructures, like decent houses, food, shops, public gardens. Thus, the self-organization aimed at providing food, becomes the engine for the self-organization of another series of initiatives which, relying on local resources and abilities, aim to redesign and re-articulate the context in which people live, and recompose different sectors of the population and different work capacities. In the name of "**food security for the community**," an idea that has begun to take root both on the Atlantic and the Pacific coast in the 1990s, the **Community Food Security Coalition** has formed at an embryonically national level, which has set up networks that ensure the production of food that is fresh and genuine because it is produced at the local level and according to biological criteria as well as its distribution at low cost destined above all to the local level. Also the transport of the food is guaranteed at a low cost, because many people, due to unemployment, cannot afford a car, and there are no public transports that take to the places where the food is produced. The Coalition declares that it wants to set up "**a more democratic food system**," and ties together 125 groups connecting food banks, networks of family farms, and organizations against poverty which, generally, in the past, did not work together. The programs of these networks, that obviously function on the basis of the concerns that tie together these people, put into contact small rural or urban farmers, food banks, soup kitchens for the poor and low income communities. **The scope and significance which these initiatives have assumed in the 1990s certainly represent a novelty.** Among other things, the self-production, distribution, and sale at low cost of fresh and genuine food marks a turning point with respect to the past, when people contented themselves with the distribution of food that welfare offered or with the coupon to purchase food, which limited the quality and quantity of the food that one could buy in the supermarkets. **They are a turning point from the viewpoint of the capacity to gain good food even in conditions of poverty.** Those who participate are **citizens who do not want to abandon their bodies to the degradation decreed by the global economy.**

But self-organization around food has become, in many cases, as I said, **the engine for self-organization for an alternative, more comprehensive production**, for an **alternative exchange of work skills, professional abilities, knowledge**, so that all these resources may be kept and preserved at the local level, to save and strengthen the quality of life in that context. This does not mean that they cannot be circulated and be an example for other social contexts. On the contrary, as we will see, this is what has happened. What has been rejected, however, is that these resources might be swallowed by the use and non-use laws of capitalist economy against the possibility of subsistence in that context. **The same can be said for the coining of an alternative form of money** to be used precisely in order to maintain or to promote activities pertaining to a local economy, these too aiming to strengthen the possibility of life of the individuals who form the community or the city. Let us mention, among these forms of alternative money, the **LETS** (Local

employment and trading schemes), a system of local money --"green dollars"-- that allows for exchanges of services coordinated by telephone by a central service. The same value is attributed to the green dollar that is attributed to the US dollar. In this case, the money does not circulate but simply serves to calculate what people give and what people have--every month people receive a report about this, including a list with the names of the other participants to the system, together with the services they can offer. This system was set up in 1983 in the Comox Valley (British Columbia) by Michael Linton, a computer programmer who had become unemployed and who, realizing how many people were in the same condition, developed a special interest in the elaboration of "community economies." Beside the United States, the LETS are very spread in Canada, in Great Britain, and in Australia. We owe, instead, to Paul Grower, an expert in communitarian and ecological economy and author of *Los Angeles : A City of the Future*, the invention of the equally famous **Ithaca Hours**, a currency whose unit corresponds to the value of ten US dollars. In this case the money circulates but can be used only in the town of Ithaca. It is significant that in 1995, already 400 communities in the 48 States of the USA had asked for the kit to learn the modalities of application of the system and were following in Ithaca's footsteps. There are other forms of alternative money. Here we have just cited the most significant examples.

Today, these forms of **alternative self-organization** which concern the **food question, the production and exchange of goods, services, professional skills and knowledge**, as well as **other currency**, we find them again as **pillars of the resistance and the struggles in the crisis** that is affecting Argentina. Self-organization that is realized by coining an alternative money, by occupying land to cultivate it even within Buenos Aires, self-producing and organizing **vast networks of barter exchange** to which already participate million of people; and confronting, together with the problem of **food** that of **health**, and **education**. Obviously, the example has been globalized producing an always broader **Landactivism** and **lifestructivism of the locality and of the exodus**. For building the possibility to escape the despotism of the global economy and its Empire allows us to continue to live, to defend a certain quality of life, to begin to open new vistas while we continue to produce and to struggle.

Bibliography

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