

Producerism: a Real-Life Example

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The work of a real community is a way of life in which purchasing power is valued less than the power to produce with one's own mind and hands. It is a culture that tries to make room for everybody, pay a little respect and look for ways to make a trade.

by Ken Westhues

The Working Centre's economic and social vision enjoys wide support. The donations it receives of money and work are proof. So are the approving comments commonly heard about the soup kitchen, the help centre, and other projects.

Still, the compliments often seem tinged with disbelief, as if the ideal of good work were unattainable. A society of skilled, small-scale producers plying their trades in creative, reciprocal relation is thought to be a nice idea, but unrealistic. The only practical, efficient way to get things done is assumed to be through giant corporations staffed by aggressive, alienated specialists.

Many readers react with similar mixed feelings to the books of the late Christopher Lasch. What a brilliant historian, they say. He did a fine job of describing the producerist thinking of nineteenth-century America, when people found meaning for their lives less in what they could buy than in what they could make. Too bad producerism is out of date. Technology now is too complex. Global capitalism is the cutting edge.

Lasch, Illich, Schumacher, and the other thinkers to whom the Working Centre looks for guidance are also sometimes accused of romanticizing small, producerist communities. Aren't they full of religious and racial bigotry? Weren't the imagined communities of the past really ghettos of suspicion and narrow-mindedness? Didn't parents tyrannize their children? Weren't women oppressed by men?

With questions like these playing my mind, I spent Sunday, November 8, 1998, at the St. Mary's Parish Fall Festival in Glasgow, Missouri. It is one example of the fairs and fund-raisers churches regularly hold across this continent. November in Kitchener brings the pudding factory at St. John's Anglican Church. Every spring come the dazzling Easter eggs and baked goods at the Ukrainian Church of the Transfiguration.

With a total population of just 1,295, Glasgow is a smaller, less prosperous town than most of those in southern Ontario. It is more distant from cities, farther

off the beaten path, a solid hour of hills and curves away from shopping malls and big-box stores. Perhaps because of its relative isolation and poverty, what I saw in Glasgow last fall was an actual, living example of what Lasch calls a producerist community. It was a celebration of the values on skilled work, creativity, autonomy, intelligence, co-operation, and fun – the same values the Working Centre tries to serve.

I wore no rose-coloured glasses, just my normal ones. Glasgow is no utopia. It has its share of rifts and rivalries, gossip and grudges. On top of that, global capitalism has not treated the town well. Livestock and grain prices are down. Local factories survive by keeping wages low. In the absence of public health insurance, many residents are terrified of getting sick. Teenagers have trouble seeing a future for themselves unless they move away.

Still, what strength of community, what wealth was apparent in that festival! The dinner committee served 1,600 meals. Think of it: a hundred parties of four people each, or fifty parties of eight, times four! People had come from all over the state – even from as far away as Canada, somebody remarked.

This was no self-serve buffet, instead a multi-course feast of appetizers, salads, ham, turkey, assorted vegetables and desserts, served by high-schoolers who could pass for professional waiters. My wheelchair-bound nephew and others unable to manage the line-ups on the stairs were welcomed through a side door without steps. Take-out was available for shut-ins, with free delivery.

Parishioners contributed the food. I helped unload a pick-up truck that arrived just when I did. It was full of huge pans of home-grown potatoes and buckets of gravy. A woman told me with quiet pride that she brought 20 berry pies, made of fruit she herself had picked. My cousin Judy had baked umpteen loaves of bread.

Far from cities where colleges offer degrees in hotel and food administration, I stood in awe of the

clockwork coordination of complex culinary, custodial, financial, and administrative skills. I doubt that anyone on the organizing committee had an academic credential related to the tasks at hand. It was triumph enough to make a commercial caterer weep.

An auction that evening capped off the festival. Eleven auctioneers, competitors in the local economy, took turns contributing their skills.

Most of the goods sold were products of local work, donated by the producers themselves. Foodstuffs topped the list. My cousin Agnes gave five bottles of her wine, three quarts of her apple butter. Nine farm families donated one hog each; two others gave ground beef. A couple named Jim and Mary gave one large fresh-baked pie per month for one whole year, delivered to the buyer's home (the auctioneer assured doubtful bidders that Mary would do the baking and Jim the delivery).

The means of production were also sold: ten bags of seed beans, four bags of seed corn. One family gave 4,000 tobacco plants, enough to set half an acre. Another gave two hours of bulldozing. The local welding company gave four hours of the proprietor's labour, the garage offered two front-end wheel alignments, and the auto parts store contributed a tool box and a portable halogen light.

Local businesses contributed what they normally have for sale: country hams from grocery stores, sleeping bags from a local factory, motor oil, grease, tires, and home appliances. Sam and Barbara, editors and publishers of *The Glasgow Missourian*, placed two subscriptions on the auction block. The Fishbeak Saloon offered a \$25 gift certificate (it sold for more than that).

Locally produced items that combine beauty and utility attracted most attention. The silence of keen interest gripped the crowd during bidding for each one, followed by murmurs of "Who got it?" and "I should have bid." There were no fewer than nine hand-made quilts: bear paw, green Irish, nine-patch, pink hearts, mauve-and-green embroidered, computer-generated local scenes, toad in the pond, baby-size, and trip around the world. I bought for my wife a white afghan made in popcorn stitch, my cousin Lydia's handiwork.

The Glasgow community is divided religiously among half a dozen denominations. This event was to benefit just one, but the diners, contributors, buyers, and auctioneers encompassed all the congregations.

I stood in line for dinner with the local Methodist minister. Among his gifts is a rich baritone, which he shares with residents of all denominations in hymnfests

at the nursing home where my mother lives. He is married to the Lutheran pastor in a nearby town. They live near her workplace. He commutes. He showed me pictures of their young adopted son. He told me the birth mother wanted the boy to have a Christian upbringing.

If the town is full of sectarian bigotry, I couldn't see it. The same goes for sexist bigotry. Did you notice, even from the few identified above, how most of the auction donations were from couples? Most enterprises in Glasgow, farm and non-farm, are joint ventures of a husband and a wife. It is an economic arrangement that breeds respect for one another's work and skill, and that reinforces the marriage bond.

I left the auction before it was done, missed my chance to win the door prize. I wanted to take the afghan to show Mom before she would retire for the night. The lady in charge insisted on showing it also to the other residents. They oohed and ahhed over the popcorn stitch, explaining to me how it is done.

The thought occurred to me that night: this is what Christopher Lasch wrote about, what the Working Centre tries to promote. It is a way of life in which purchasing power is valued less than the power to produce with one's own mind and hands. It is a culture that tries to make room for everybody, pay a little respect and look for ways to make a trade.

The black American novelist, A. J. Verdelle, put it this way in her 1995 novel, *The Good Negress*: "When you put y'hands on somethin' and make it somethin' else, that will heal you lower places than you cry from."

St. Mary's Fall Festival left me feeling hopeful. This is not to say optimistic. I know that, statistically, celebrations like this are becoming rare. The culture of global capitalism gnaws daily at little communities in every corner of the earth.

Lasch points out that optimism is a cheap and shallow attitude, dependent on statistical projections. Hope is something deeper, rooted in what people can do in the face of all odds when they set their minds to it.

The bidding was fierce for a set of eight miniature farm implements: three tractors, a mower, a baler, a rake, a mulch tiller and a 12-row planter. These toys became, I suspect, a Christmas gift from farm parents to farm child. There are plenty of children in Glasgow whose hearts are set on growing up like their moms and dads. With faith, hope, love, and luck, some of them will succeed.