***Buying Local: A Movement of Two Faces***

Many of the greatest revolutions in history have a component of buying local: economic nationalism has long been a pillar of restoring self-control and strengthening national identity. In America during the 1770s, the British Townshend Act imposed taxes on all British goods imported into the colonies, such as paper, paint, glass, tea, and lead.[[1]](#footnote-1) Resistance erupted, specifically Boston, and led to a boycott of British goods and the formation of the Daughters of Liberty, a group of women who manufactured American made goods for patriots who refused to use imported goods.[[2]](#footnote-2) Similarly, in India, Gandhi’s Swadeshi movement included boycotting British goods and investing in domestic products and processes.[[3]](#footnote-3) The consumer-driven movement of buying “local” is still a popular method of regaining control and expressing political attitudes. The ‘economic nationalism’ motivation (or, alternatively, anti-globalism) has been pervasive through history, but a new motivation of anti-corporate sentiment is on the rise. While the individuals involved with these movements may seem to inhabit different ends of the socioeconomic and political spectrum, with liberals leading the anti-corporate movement and conservative, working-class Americans supporting economic nationalism, the goal is the same: ***buy locally made goods***. We can examine these groups, their motivations, and the consequences of this movement through the microcosms of the metro-Detroit area and Ann Arbor, both within the state of Michigan. In metro-Detroit, during and after the bailout of the Big 3 car companies (Ford, GM, and Chrysler), a sentiment of buying local, American-made cars swept not only the city of Detroit but leaked into the consumer habits of the entire nation. In a similar way, in Ann Arbor, a university town known for its high concentration of cultural capital, is home to a significantly higher amount of locally owned coffee shops and bookstores than most cities. Using the contrast between buying American-made cars and a local cup of coffee, I hope to simplify the seemingly contradictory movement of buying local, the motivations of vastly different demographics of the activists behind the movement, and the unheard voices and unintended consequences of buying local.

Examples of the ‘buy local’ movement can be analyzed to see how the movement has expanded in the last decade, from both sides of the political and socioeconomic spectrum. In 2010, American Expresses started Small Business Saturday for the Saturday after Thanksgiving--by 2011, Senate unanimously passed a resolution in favor of the day, and by 2016, small business revenue on the Saturday after Thanksgiving reached $15.4 billion USD with 112 million American shoppers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Another buy local movement, The NC 10% Campaign, was also started in 2010, and encouraged individuals in North Carolina to spend at least 10% of their food dollars on NC-grown food, in an effort to grow the state-wide economy by $3.5 billion dollars.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 2016, Donald Trump ran for office on a platform of “Buy American” and “Hire American”, with his original chief strategist pitching the idea of “economic nationalism” as the antithesis of “globalism”, which he argued put the interests of multinational corporations and international elite above those of working-class Americans. The United Auto Workers, the largest auto-industry union, is currently working on a campaign to discourage consumers from buying foreign made cars.[[6]](#footnote-6) While these separate examples of the buy American/buy local movement have plainly different motivations, their end goal is the same: to stimulate economic prosperity within a community and to keep money from a potential threat to this provincial prosperity.

As a student at the University of Michigan, going to school in a city like Ann Arbor, I am surrounded by independently owned coffee shops (along with a fair share of Starbucks’) and independently owned bookstores (of course, there is a Barnes and Nobles on campus as well). In a college town area as predominantly young, liberal, and diverse as Ann Arbor, the political sentiment of the town shifts the Washtenaw district it resides in firmly into the blue. In such a liberal city with high amounts of cultural capital, the abundance of small, non-franchised coffee shops and bookstores feels like the quintessential cliche college campus aesthetic. The reason behind this phenomena is not simply attributed to high levels of wealth or a higher need for coffee and books than in other parts of the nation (although, as a college student, I may disagree). This abundance of non-corporate entities is an attribute of a heavily ‘young-liberal’ backlash against the “soulless corporation”, in favor of, rather, a local store where they feel like a customer rather than a consumer. In the 1886 court case of Santa Clara County vs Southern Pacific Railroad, Judge Morton Horowitz decided that the corporation was, in fact, a natural entity and thus deserved the rights of an individual.[[7]](#footnote-7) This ruling did not sit well with the American public, who, then and now, saw the rise of multinational corporations and mergers, as a definite sign of the soullessness of the corporation. While this term, since the 1890s, has become commonplace in most studies of consumerism and corporate culture, the reasons behind it are less transparent. The main factor, as Marchland addresses, is the “coldness and aloofness of the giant business corporation, in the sense that it was oftentimes ascribed to scale, alone”.[[8]](#footnote-8) With these giant corporations, feeling a connection to the people behind a brand or logo is often rare, and this innate lack of human contact, due to “bigness” of the firm, squarely puts these firms in a ‘soulless’ category. With smaller shops, instead of being one of the many ‘consumers’, you are, instead, a ‘customer’. This distinction in verbiage was differentiated by Raymond Williams.[[9]](#footnote-9) Consume, he argues, is traced back to ideas of devouring, wasting, and spending; therefore a consumer is an abstract figure in an abstract market, whose actions could potentially create negative externalities.[[10]](#footnote-10) Customers, on the other hand, allude to a more personal relationship to an enterprise, and, as opposed to consumers, their actions have potential positive externalities. In Ann Arbor, these theories of consumerism translate to a culture that demands a larger amount of ‘soulful’ corporations. The city itself has over 16 non-franchised, unique to Ann Arbor, coffee shops and around 14 bookstores, also independently-owned.[[11]](#footnote-11) These shops own their ‘local’ identity, with Roos Roast, an Ann Arbor original, noting on their ‘About Us’ page “Deep local Ann Arbor. Yeah, that's us”. The anti-corporate sentiment behind these stores is further highlighted with the upcoming closure of “Aunt Agatha’s Mystery Bookstore”. In the public message published early April of this year, the owners Robin and Jamie Agnew stated that fierce local competition and Amazon were the main reasons for their demise. Much of the local community commented on this Facebook post with the likings of “downtown Ann Arbor will be losing more of its charm”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Similarly, when the beloved Shaman Drum bookstore also closed its doors in 2010, the owner released a statement pushing for Ann Arbor area customers to support other local independent book stores, rather than big chain names. The upcoming construction of high-rise apartment complexes on a major street on the campus of UofM has elicited similar responses of Ann Arbor townies, stating that there are major losses to Ann Arbor’s culture due to the corporate nature of these constructions.[[13]](#footnote-13) In many ways, the identity of Ann Arbor is tied closely with its ‘shop local’ sentiments, and with the increase of corporate threats, many fear that this integral part of Ann Arbor may become lost. This example of Ann Arbor shows us a larger trend: young, educated liberals are protesting the ‘soulless corporation’ by pushing a buy local movement that has caused more of these noncorporate entities to enter areas like Ann Arbor, with this key demographic and high cultural capital; however, this isn’t always successful as corporations, such as Amazon in the book sphere, can offer higher convenience and lower prices that independently owned shops cannot match.

In Detroit, the ‘buy local’ movement takes a new shape: buying American made cars, instead of the popular Asian or European brands. As the automobile manufacturing hub of the nation, and the city that suffered the most in the crash of 2008 and following bankruptcy of 2 of the Big 3 car companies, Detroit residents have come to realize how dependent they are on the automobile manufacturing industry. This ‘buy local’ consumer movement is powered by the idea that buying American goods will create jobs at home, and thus increase the economic vitality of America, rather than its global competitors.[[14]](#footnote-14) The automobile is a staple American product, with the representation of the family ‘soccer mom’ car or the cliche moment of buying your first car being central to American identity, at least in a trite sense. The abundance of ‘lovemarks’ surrounded by cars, especially in their marketing, embeds them deeply into American culture. Because of this, many Americans see the rise in sales of foreign car brands an attack on American manufacturing, identity, and culture. A Harris poll found that “eighty-seven percent [of respondents] said it’s important or very important to buy American-made cars to ‘support American companies.’, with 76% citing ‘patriotism’ as a main motivator in this opinion. However, this number does not align with the buying patterns of the American people, as in 2015, consumers purchased more than twice the amount of imported light-duty cars than domestic cars.[[15]](#footnote-15) The recent push for ‘Buy American’, spearheaded by the Trump Administration and its policy of economic nationalism, has a different political key demographic than the anti-corporate ‘buy local’ movement. Macomb County, Michigan, the third largest county in Michigan, is pegged by many as responsible for Michigan’s shift from blue to red during the 2016 presidential election. 82% of residents in Macomb County are white, with 23% of 25 year olds or older holding bachelor degrees. In this way, Macomb County represents the opposite of Ann Arbor: a homogeneous city without high amounts of cultural capital. Although Macomb County voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012, Trump’s message of the American white working class as victims of international trade resonated with the predominantly blue-collar workforce.[[16]](#footnote-16) With the election of Donald Trump, the rise of economic nationalism has become a pillar of the countries domestic economic policy. In March, standing in front of a banner that read “Buy American, Hire American” Trump promised the people of Detroit and the country that the U.S. would become the “car capital of the world” again, stating that these foreign competitors have “stolen our jobs, they’ve stolen our companies”.[[17]](#footnote-17) This “them versus us” mentality is why some label the rise of economic nationalism as a xenophobic movement, backed by white conservatives who fear the effects of immigration and globalization.[[18]](#footnote-18) Historian Dana Frank, in her book *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism*, outlines how, historically, the “Buy American” movement has targeted minorities, an argument that has already come to fruition with the current pause on H1B work visas under the Trump administration.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, as in the example of Macomb County, it is difficult to pin this consumer movement on solely xenophobic tendencies. 21% of Macomb residents work in manufacturing, and with more manufacturing being outsourced to cheaper foreign labor, the “Buy American” support may be a plea to stay relevant and a necessary movement to back for working class Americans who are trying to support their families.[[20]](#footnote-20) The “Buy American” movement may have anti-globalism and anti-immigration sentiments, but working class white Americans have backed this movement because the loss of manufacturing jobs to foreign nations has directly decreased their economic prosperity. The residents in Macomb county, who are the backbone of the automobile manufacturing Big 3, support the protectionist movement of economic nationalism, and while these sentiments may stem from xenophobic sentiments, they also stem from a *need* for economic stability which they believe will come from supporting American companies.

While both of these examples of the buy local movement have support from their own separate demographics, who are, interestingly, often noted as being on opposite ends of the political spectrum, there are many people who do not fit into this narrative, yet are still affected by these consumer movements. These buy local movements both bring up an array of questions: Are the small businesses hurt by corporate power important enough to support, or just a victim of capitalism? Are people willing to pay the premium for American-made or non-corporate products? Is the label of “American products” even true to its reputation of helping the American economy? Trade has been relevant to our economy for centuries, and no city in the country is completely self-sustaining. Further, not all products can be created or grown in a specific local community, and as globalization has made products like avocados available in Detroit in January, it is unlikely that we, as consumers, would be willing to give up this diversity in products for the buy local movement. 95% of Americans shopped at Walmart last year, and half of American workers making less than $50,000 a year: when prices for local products are higher than their corporate or imported counterparts, buying local may not be an option for a majority of residents.[[21]](#footnote-21) Additionally, there is major criticism against the “Buy American” for its perceived hypocrisy: 10 of the top 20 cars made domestically are from Asian or European brands.[[22]](#footnote-22) In this way, the “Buy American” movement may not even be true to its name--by discounting products simply by the origin of the brand, consumers avoid spending on products that are American made, but may not have the American name attached to them. However, even if we are supporting American workers or our local communities when we buy local goods, why is this our goal? Economist Steve Landsburg from the University of Rochester stated “I hold this truth to be self-evident: It is just plain ugly to care more about total strangers in Detroit than about total strangers in Juarez”.[[23]](#footnote-23) When we buy our produce from major supermarkets, there is a good chance that the farmers we are supporting are those in more distant areas of the country or Mexico, whose farms function year round, and buying local goods actually takes away from the money going to these farmers. Yet, we saw in the election of 2016 that the American public does not hold the same truths as Landsburg does, and that strangers within our own nation are more important than those in other countries. This mentality of protectionism has historically led to racist tendencies, as in the 1980s when Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man who was given a job in a Detroit auto plant, was killed by an auto plant superintendent and laid-off auto worker, both of whom were white.[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus, while strides to “Hire American” may help those who need manufacturing work to support their families, if the same movement can lead to the exclusion of non-white labor (or even violence against non-white labor), then the movement may not be creating a net positive for society. Although those supporting, and those standing to gain, from the buy local movements (from either the anti-corporate or anti-globalism side) are vocal about the benefits of these movements, there are many unheard voices within these movements who, if given a platform, would change the public narrative of buying local.

Because of the differences in motivation and targeted demographic of the two buy local movements described above, it is hard to say if these movements can be evaluated as one. In Ann Arbor, the anti-corporate sentiment has led to a culture of buying local and a push from local shops to support one another, even under the threat of cheaper corporate substitutes. Alternatively, in Detroit, the movement to buy local comes from a need to support manufacturing jobs, and potentially a protectionism mentality that bleeds over to a sense of xenophobia stemming from a fear of foreign labor. However, these movements push for a similar agenda--keeping money local helps support our communities and keeps money away from those who may be more powerful or can offer goods at cheaper prices and in more convenient ways--like books from Amazon or cars from Japan. The unheard voices in this movement add another complexity of what makes up an ethical economy. Is it ethical to support the working class in America above the working class of foreign nations? Is it ethical to ask Americans to buy products that are more expensive, just because they support a local economy? Is it ethical to support a movement that has historically led to racism and an exclusion of non-white Americans? The buy local movement, although it takes many forms, is growing in popularity, but the question if this movement is a net positive or net negative on society is still to be seen.

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