



August 2019

How to Privilege the Local

Contribution to GTI Forum [Think Globally, Act Locally?](#)

David Barkin

The debate about global transformation has often been characterized by seemingly irreconcilable positions about local and global action. It might be worthwhile to try to simplify this gap. On the one hand, we have an unending search for ways to forge a single global culture based on certain universal principles that emerged from the cumulative contributions of centuries of idealistic proponents hoping to lay the foundations for reconciling the different value systems and relationships that societies have developed over the centuries with their environs, with the planet on which they depend. Many of these luminaries made important contributions, directing people's energies towards the construction of new institutions and ways of living that offer a better quality of life while trying to care for the environment and the myriad other species with which we share the planet.

On the other hand, we can observe the perseverance and flourishing of countless local cultures and ways of life that organize production and social interactions among peoples on the margins of the seemingly overwhelming penetration of the global capitalist system. These disparate groups have evolved for centuries, millennia, sometimes escaping from the centripetal forces of history, sometimes adapting, suffering, or succumbing to the destructive agents of integration, be they imperial, colonial, or capital. For some time, these groups have been emerging from their isolation, thrusting asunder the shackles, or reconstructing societies capable of different forms of organization. Many are overcoming the limitations imposed by the present system of nation-states, carving out their own territories, sometimes with the agreement of these institutions, other times in spite of their prohibitions. Called native lands, protected areas, conservation offsets, or spiritual reserves, the officially recognized areas now comprise more than one-quarter

of the total land area of the planet; if we were to add the areas controlled by peasant groups, actively involved in creating their own areas in which to flourish (e.g., La Via Campesina), the area represents much more of the world.¹

A significant part of our discussion of the global versus the local is mired in an endless debate about how we might construct a better world. The ongoing experiences of thousands of communities around the world that are already engaged in their own programs for forging viable societies to improve their quality of life while protecting their ecosystems. These peoples, numbering hundreds of millions, or perhaps many more, are not waiting for the institutions that oppress them to fail, or for the walls that enclose them to crumble. Although many must devote considerable energies to prosecuting the demanding struggles to resist the inroads of capitalist expansion, many of them have remarkably clear visions of the worlds to which they aspire. [Brian Tokar](#) refers to the astonishing resilience of the Kurds, which involves not just a prolonged military struggle but also an optimistic vision of their future, tearing down many shibboleths including, not the least, of a patriarchal society.

The early contribution of Ivan Illich is especially relevant. In his *Tools for Conviviality*, he drew a roadmap for understanding the possibilities of constructing many new worlds. Conviviality is a platform for the forging of a new society, one that transcends the profound limitations of our present world, to move towards a socialism that would require “an inversion of our present institutions and the substitution of convivial for industrial tools.” This new framework “will remain a pious dream unless the ideals of socialist justice prevail.” He goes on to highlight a position common to many of today’s social movements: “the present crisis of our major institutions ... abridge basic human freedom for the sake of providing people with more institutional outputs...A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favor of another member’s equal freedom.” This is crucial: although a convivial world does not lead to an equal society, traditional as well as new economic devices would be needed to “keep the net transfer of power within bounds.”²

It should not be surprising that many of the communities involved in these local struggles are actively engaging in solidarity movements with their counterparts in their own parts of the world, and with other internationally.³ We need to generate an encompassing dynamic of inclusion—spaces in which an enormous variety of local approaches to human and environmental well-being are already under construction. The sharing of these experiences and the search for mutual reinforcement on a global scale is precisely what is required to privilege the local.⁴

Endnotes

1. Stephen Garnett, et al. "A Spatial Overview of the Global Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation," *Nature Sustainability* 1, no. 7 (2018): 369–374.

2. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Perennial Library, 1973), 12, 17.

3. A recent compilation of very short essays that brings together some of the most original thinking about the ways in which these alternatives are being woven together can be found in Ashish Kothari, et al., *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019).

4. For more on this approach, see David Barkin and Alejandra Sánchez, "The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject: New Forms of Social Transformation," *Third World Quarterly* (2019).

About the Author



David Barkin is a professor at the Metropolitan University in Mexico City, where he has taught since 1975, and an emeritus member of the National Research Council and the Academy of Sciences in Mexico. He has taught in many countries, including the US, France, Spain, Cuba, and Chile, and has published 22 books and more than 200 referred articles in scientific journals. His research focuses on ecological economics, alternative paradigms for society, and the problems of indigenous societies, with whom he collaborates in creating designs for alternative futures. His work is oriented to having an impact on the daily lives of marginal peoples in Latin America and in changing the dominant paradigms in the academy.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Chella Rajan, "How to Privilege the Local," contribution to GTI Forum "Think Globally, Act Locally?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-local-barkin>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.