



August 2019

The Pragmatism of Thinking Globally Contribution to GTI Forum [Think Globally, Act Locally?](#)

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When the catchphrase “Think Globally, Act Locally” rose to prominence amongst those who brought the global environmental and human development catastrophe to global attention around the time of the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, it was the second part of the slogan that came across as radical. The assumption amongst activists and those who would, more generally, express concern with the weight of world problems and the collision course of human development and environmental agendas was that the appeal and the significance of thinking globally was a foregone conclusion, a done deal. It turns out, in our present political moment, that the priorities have reversed. It is the thinking globally part that progressive people now need to fight for, that has become the more radical piece of the what-to-do puzzle.

As a pragmatist, I still think this is the right motto: both halves, in equal parts. We are at our best as social animals, solution-seekers, agents of a future that is more desirable for more of us than the past has been, when we refuse any limits to the horizons of our thinking, and when we approach the challenge of action as starting close to the scales and loci of our daily lives. Even when we fail each time we try.

The problem I have with the present political moment’s variety of localism carries no criticism of local action per se. The problem I see is that this localism is no longer being advanced as a significant next step from thinking globally; this localism is instead being advanced as an alternative to thinking globally.

Localist Paul Kingsnorth condemns the environmental movement in [The Guardian](#) as being

indistinguishable from global capitalism: “Green globalism has become part of the growth machine; a comfortable notion for comfortable people who don’t really want much to change.” The correction course implied by this stance, for localists, is some version of lowering our eyes to the soil on which we tread at the same time as we shoulder the yoke to learn how to plough it. I do not deny that such a path of local, biophilic self-reliance has much to teach many of us—rediscovering the focus and peace of localized and lower-technology lifestyles; reconciling ourselves with our place on the earth, our demands on it, and non-human nature’s offerings to us; etc. Local action and social ties, when cultivated, can constitute good work. But when this work is seen as an alternative to global thinking, not its necessary synergistic complement, it is pragmatically indistinguishable from the work of gravediggers. That impoverished path of local action will never hold a candle to the possibilities of shooting for the stars, for the majority of the world’s population. With good reason, and with deep meaning for the need to keep all of our fellow humans’ hopes in mind.

Why? Not in the patronizing way it probably sounds. Not because liberals like me are duplicitous, overeducated, white supremacist, colonialist, paternalist sissies who pretend to care about the hopes of others to the extent that we are pretty sure we can keep our position, our property, our pension plan, and the rest of our packages of privilege. There is plenty of all of those qualities to go around, and that will fuel a lot of arguments to come, as these qualities have done before. My worry about the loss of global thinking is that it is not pragmatic. Pragmatic in the sense that Jane Addams understood (in her 1902 book *Democracy and Social Ethics*) from her own career of thinking globally and acting locally: “We are not content to include all men [sic] in our hopes, but have become conscious that all men are hoping and are part of the same movement of which we are a part.”

The gravest error of the localist movement has nothing to do with the pursuit of local action; it has to do with its abandonment of the importance of understanding what all our fellow humans are hoping for. What I object to in the growing localist agenda is that the green movement (or, for that matter, the feminist movement, the decolonialization movement, the movement for Black lives, or any other socially progressive movement that has met with some degree of success in attracting global attention) is some kind of Promethean thief that should be abandoned in

self-flagellating penance. Instead, these movements should be seen as containing all the best possibilities for hope in defining the institutions of a more hopeful, less oppressive future, and in seeing their compulsion toward growth as endemic to that hope for the human spirit. As compromised as it is, as compromised as we all are, to turn our backs on this global thinking is to abandon hope that it is worth it to keep trying to better understand and better channel our own hubris in pro-social, pro-ecological, pro-flourishing ways.

About the Author



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Cite as Meg Holden, "The Pragmatism of Thinking Globally," contribution to GTI Forum "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-local-holden>.

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