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Think Cosmically, Act Globally

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

Heikki Patomäki

It is true almost by definition that without local activities, no movement can succeed. Physically, we cannot be in two places simultaneously, and all political and other activities must take place somewhere, i.e., in some locality. Moreover, most people reside and work in a particular locality, broadly defined, typically meaning that the locality and its natural setting form the explicit context of their everyday lives and meaningful social relations.

Also, language matters. English may be the cosmopolitan *lingua franca*, but only a relatively small elite of non-native speakers are truly fluent in English, and even they may not experience it as the language for effortlessly expressing their inner selves and emotions. Arabic, Hindi, and Indonesian have roughly the same number of native speakers as English – and Mandarin many more. There are some two thousand widely used languages in the world.

The experience of transnational movements indicates that immediate popular success is likely only in those places where a movement has roots in local and national experiences and stories. However, locality is not the same thing as the nation. Typically, the term “locality” refers to villages, towns, and cities, or to particular parts of cities and megacities. In order to exist, nations must be imagined in terms of narrative and visual prototypes, metaphors, and framings, constituting a national imaginary. These imaginaries tend to exclude groups and communities (and perhaps also localities) that exist within the borders of the state.

What is more, a closer look at the everyday practices of people reveals quickly how their lives are interconnected through the world economy. Much of people’s daily lives consists of economic activities: working and consuming goods and services. Although the economy is for

many people just one aspect of life—by no means an end in itself or always the main center of attention—everyday activities are conditioned directly or indirectly by workings of the world economy, whether through chains of production and service, the division of labor, macro-economic growth, formation of business cycles, relations of power, or ideologies. The everyday is in fact made up of elements that connect different parts of the globe to each other. The world economy is deeply interdependent, despite the fact that politics continues to revolve around localities and states.

The substance and quality of everyday life is also dependent on abstract processes such as global warming, securitization, and relations of peace and war. Adequate stories about these processes cannot be told in terms of mere localities or states. To really understand these processes requires going beyond the international and global as well.

“Global” is a spatial category, not a temporal one. The term “world” is in this regard better. Whereas the “global” has a closed finite form in space (“the Earth,” the “globe”), the “world” presents a legacy of open and evolving complexity. Conceived in terms of “world” in this sense, ecological, economic, scientific, and security processes involve wide spatio-temporalities. They may evoke epic stories about globalization, perhaps as a new coming-together of humanity, but the idea of an open and evolving complexity calls also for more generic framings. Any planet with a growing population of sentient and cultural beings and growing industrial economy (whatever form it may assume) will at some point reach a threshold, at which a new layer of cultural emergence becomes a condition for the endurance and flourishing of the species and the planetary biosphere. This perspective suggests a new slogan: think cosmically, act globally. The new slogan does not stand alone but requires new stories, visual prototypes, metaphors, and framings.

None of this contradicts the truism that all political activities must take place in a concrete location or the fact that the still prevailing imaginary is national. Indeed, the reaction against the emptiness of the “global” is historically understandable. Since the 1980s, forces associated with the neoliberal Right fastened onto the new buzzword “globalization” to push for the creation of a single global free market and the spread of individualist and consumerist values around the world. They translated the rising global imaginary into ideological claims laced with references

to planetary economic interdependence rooted in the principles of free-market capitalism: global trade and financial markets; worldwide flows of goods, services, and labor; transnational corporations; offshore financial centers; and so on. From the standpoint of market globalism, differences that matter to people are hard to see. The economic techno-logic of this form of globalism implies that everyone must be identical and submit to market globalism and its characteristic and often repressive modes of subjectivity. Market globalism is devoid of meanings that matter.

Stories about world history, world economy, world politics, and world futures must be anchored in a project that is explicit about the importance of belonging and identity. For this project, identity concerns struggles for recognition. These struggles will continue to diversify claims and open up new possibilities. They can politicize market globalism, in particular in terms of problematizing the privileges and inequalities characteristic of market globalization. There are better and more emancipatory ways for organizing democracy and relations of production and exchange. New common institutions are needed on a global scale. Simultaneously, ecological sustainability may require the partial relocalization of some parts or aspects of production (e.g. food), even though any attempt at relocalization will have wide and also negative repercussions across the world economy. This form of globalism is reflexive and has to do with the general relationship between socioeconomic equality and identity. Thus conceived, world-political movements and parties can promote the recognition of differences while relativizing all tendencies toward parochialism and problematizing all claims about uniqueness that may justify exclusion or dominance.

About the Author



Heikki Patomäki is a social scientist, activist, and professor of world politics at the University of Helsinki. He is currently a visiting fellow at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. He has published over 20 books, 200 research papers, and hundreds of popular articles and blogs on such topics as the philosophy and methodology of social sciences, peace and futures studies, and global political economy, justice, and democracy. His books include *Disintegrative Tendencies in Global Political Economy: Exits and Conflicts*, *The Great Eurozone Disaster: From Crisis to Global New Deal*, *The Political Economy of Global Security: War, Future Crises and Changes in Global Governance*, and *A Possible World: Democratic Transformation of Global Institutions* (with T. Teivainen).

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