



August 2019

Response to Comments

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

Brian Tokar

I am grateful to GTI's stellar network for the lively discussion. Clearly, my initial responses to the questions on local and global politics brought to the surface some important differences in perspective, with contributions from Richard Heinberg and Gwendolyn Hallsmith making the case for action at a smaller scale and Andreas Bummel, Meg Holden, and Heikki Patomäki underscoring the need for global outlooks and global identities. I think we all agree that various local responses to problems that may be global in scope have tremendous promise, but also raise numerous complexities and concerns. There may indeed be a wider revolutionary potential, as David Barkin has written, in the multiplicity of local and indigenous cultures that are rooted in communal principles. As the new book *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*—edited by Arturo Escobar and others and to which I am a proud contributor—outlines, there are wealth of both traditional and contemporary outlooks throughout the world that express precisely the kinds of cooperative, earth-centered perspectives that most in this dialogue are reaching toward.

The responses invoke core principles that can help inform our path forward, calling for transitional approaches that are deeply relational, radically inclusive, humane, rhizomic, convivial, and grounded in values of human rights, participatory democracy, solidarity, and mutual aid.

These constitute the basis for just the type of extended movement of movements necessary for us to find our way out of the present malaise, grow to thrive in community, and affirm our vital ties to people throughout the world. Barkin, as well as Helena Norberg Hodge, invoked La Vía Campesina as a central inspiration. In my view, that worldwide network of peasant movements may come closest to embodying such a vision. La Vía also appears to operate very effectively in

the international sphere without placing undue burdens on members of local organizations who prefer to live and work entirely within their local regions.

There is no doubt in my mind that the “global,” along with the national realm, has excessively colonized our thinking, as Arturo Escobar so eloquently describes, and often undermines the political imagination that is necessary for a pluriverse of local expressions to thrive. I agree with Jackie Smith that national elections and policy debates occupy far too much of our attention and that our personal and political energies are usually better spent elsewhere. This was affirmed by my own involvement in the early evolution of Green politics in the US. I know that many outstanding activists have passed through Green Party work over the decades, but an increasingly narrow focus on electoralism here in the US squandered much of its liberatory potential.

At the same time, decisions made by elected officials, and even more often by unelected corporate managers, continue to impede people’s lives, suffocate local initiatives, and ultimately threaten the survival of much of life on earth. From Katchipattu to Ladakh, from Ogoniland to the coast of Oaxaca—threatened by mega-scale wind power developers—we can probably all think of countless examples of local communities whose way of life has been threatened by forces of global capitalism, nationalism, militarism, and imperialism that have been cited by Chella Rajan, Helena Norberg Hodge, and others. In addition, numerous local initiatives are more subtly threatened by capital flight, hyperinflation, and other financial manipulations. What other than a global movement of movements—perhaps on the model of *Vía Campesina*—can simultaneously sustain the integrity of local expressions and mount a sufficient challenge to the global forces that threaten to undermine us all?

I very much resonate with Norberg Hodge’s focus on combining “resistance and renewal.” That is precisely the theme of a new international collection on grassroots climate responses I am currently editing. This synthesis has been a focus of my writing since the 1980s and of foundational work in social ecology since the mid-1960s, and it has been central to the success of many contemporary movements, at least since the wave of antinuclear activism that swept the US and Europe in the late 1970s. In the lead-up to the 2015 Paris climate conference, Maxime Combes, from the global justice network Attac, proposed in a widely circulated paper that

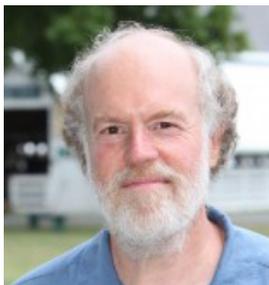
the civil society response to the anticipated shortcomings of the UN conference be framed as a unified expression of *blockadia* and *alternatiba*. The former represented the worldwide proliferation of local spaces of resistance to fossil fuel development, as celebrated in Naomi Klein's book *This Changes Everything*, and first coined by the nonviolent campaigners of the Texas-based Tar Sands Blockade. The latter is a French Basque term that was adopted as the theme of a colorful bicycle tour that encircled France during the summer of 2015 to draw public attention to local alternative projects in various economic sectors. This synthesis of resistance and renewal represents the kind of "glocalist" thinking that challenges systems of domination and colonialism, while helping sustain the integrity of a vast array of distinctly local responses.

Aaron Vansintjan invoked the historic role of organized labor in challenging corporate dominance and the structures of capitalism. I was reminded that we are approaching the twentieth anniversary of the great convergence of labor and environmental activists to challenge the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999. At a time when the WTO had come to represent the increasing ability of global institutions to suppress local economies and override measures to protect people's health and well-being, a worldwide movement for global justice—despite its shortcomings—raised public scrutiny, bolstered the opposition of Global South delegates, and ultimately made it impossible for the WTO to fully entrench its hegemonic agenda. Ever since Seattle, trade politics have been subjected to far greater skepticism and challenges from across the political spectrum. Michelle Williams's comments also remind us of the worldwide movement that helped make it possible for local actors, after decades of struggle, to finally overturn South African apartheid.

As several contributors have argued, the question of political power should not be underestimated. I agree that many grassroots networks, including the Transition Towns and ecovillage networks, mentioned by Frank Fischer, are often far too apolitical and non-confrontational in their attempts to reflect a broad local consensus and convey a positive message. It is more important, in my view, to highlight efforts that directly challenge the system's myths of invincibility and foster ties of solidarity that can help lift the voices of those who remain marginalized.

Finally, I agree that we need to navigate toward new ways of thinking that meaningfully transcend the global/local divide. I share David Bollier's affinity for Bruno Latour's call for "terrestrial" thinking as a possible way beyond the current dualisms. Latour urges us to reject both reactionary nationalism (which he frames as "Local-minus") and also the remote, earth-from-outer-space distancing that typically accompanies even the most enlightened variants of globalism. Our extended conversation here may leave us with more questions than answers, but it also reaffirms my concluding plea to reach beyond capitalism's false choices and work toward the goal of a truly interdependent global community of communities. The future of life on earth may depend on our ability to do just that.

About the Author



Brian Tokar is an activist and author, a lecturer in Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont, and an active board member of 350 Vermont and the Institute for Social Ecology. He is the author of *The Green Alternative*, *Earth for Sale*, and *Toward Climate Justice: Perspectives on the Climate Crisis and Social Change*. He is also the co-editor of *Agriculture and Food in Crisis* (with Fred Magdoff) and two collections on biotechnology issues: *Redesigning Life?* and *Gene Traders*. He is currently working on a new international collection on civil society climate responses, titled *Climate Justice and Community Renewal: Campaigns and Strategies from the Frontlines*. He holds a BS in physics and biology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an MA in biophysics from Harvard University.

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Cite as Brian Tokar, "Response to Comments," contribution to GTI Forum "Think Locally, Act Locally?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-local-tokar-response>.

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