



August 2021

Capitalist Constraints on the Possible Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

Akeel Bilgrami

Richard Falk's [essay](#) on global solidarity explores the scope for a genuinely transformative politics for our time. He asks us to refuse the cramping of possibilities for politics that “realist” outlooks would impose on our imagination.

There seem to me to be *at least* two familiar forms of “realist” dismissal of a politics that seeks fundamental change.

One takes the form of saying, “Don’t construct ideal political theories, seek out the amelioration that is immediately feasible in the present circumstances.” The other dismisses many radical proposals as a nostalgic hankering for the social and economic life and conditions of a bygone era. Consider the sneering dismissal of indigenous outlooks on climate issues that take all the tinkering solutions to these issues that are in the air—from geoengineering to cap-and-trade—as manifestly insufficient, and would instead have us return to a conception of “nature” that refuses to equate it with “natural resources.”

Let me say something brief about the second and leave the first for another occasion.

It is hard not to feel that charges of nostalgia are most often to be found on the pens and lips of complacent people. Such people need to be reminded that the most effectively creative early efforts during the Renaissance were constantly being dismissed by medieval scholastics as a nostalgia for a bygone classical age.

The fact is that the complacency from which this qualm about nostalgia is expressed is actually often *not innocent*. What people choose to be complacent about and what they therefore

choose to be dismissive about is rather selective, and the selectivity is driven by ideological considerations. Charges of nostalgia are a cousin of a phenomenon that we might call the “It’s too late...” phenomenon. If something is too late to reverse, it is nostalgic to wish to reverse it. “It’s too late to return to 1967 borders in Israel; there have been far too many settlements over the last decades...” is just one example. But notice that no one ever said during the decades-long Cold War, “It’s too late, the Soviet Union is here to stay and in a large part of the world, private capital is simply a thing of the past. It would be nostalgic to aspire to return to it there.” Instead, they put unrelenting pressure (even the pressure of untold violence in Southeast Asia and Latin America) on any socialist experiment, decade after decade until virtually every such experiment fell apart. Thus, qualms about nostalgia are made not only from a point of view of complacency, but a complacency driven by ideological points of view, with deliberate selectivity.

But such motives apart, how shall we assess the charge of nostalgia when it is directed against, for instance, the view that we should refuse to treat “nature” as synonymous with “natural resources”? As any person who is not devoid of common sense knows, questions about climate change and our attitudes towards nature are not sequestered questions of ecology. They are shot through with the most fundamental questions about political economy; and, in particular, such a refusal to treat “nature” with impunity as “natural resources” requires one to transcend the fundamental economic tendencies of capitalism as we have known them. But, on the other hand, as Frederic Jameson points out, “we can more easily imagine the end of the world than we can imagine the end of capitalism.”

How shall we diagnose this chronic failure of imagination in our time?

It would seem that its real source lies in the fact that all past efforts to put social democratic constraints on capital are basically unstable. (This is so even in Scandinavian countries, though, being in a peripheral belt of capitalism, they are a little less vulnerable to being constantly undermined by the tendencies of capital.) In the roughly four decades since the remantling of the Bretton Woods institutions, this instability of social democracy has been largely due to the runaway mobility of financialized capital under the new turn that globalization took just then. This is particularly a problem for governments of countries of the South, who are perpetually in fear of capital flight.

Now, most governments which do attempt such challenges to capital do so under the pressure of popular movements. Thus, for instance, Lula came to power in Brazil on the surge of a very impressive popular movement. But neither he nor his successor could achieve very much by way of serious social democratic policy because of anxieties about capital flight. And, in this context, the global solidarity of which Falk speaks will have to mean that were governments to effectively pursue social democratic policies, there would have to be popular movements waiting to occur at each place to which capital flies. And that indeed does look like a very unrealistic scenario. Hardt and Negri had some idea of a deterritorialized perpetual globalized movement by what they labelled a “multitude”—but nobody has shown that idea to be anything but a theorist’s fantasy. Even just within the Eurozone, Podemos did not show solidarity with Syriza during the worse period of the latter’s confrontation with the banking and corporate elites in Brussels and Frankfurt.

There is, it would seem, much more scope for success of movements against the tendencies of capital within nations of the South. Just a few years ago in India, there was an impressive solidarity shown between urban working people and the peasantry despite distinct and conflicting interests—since peasants want higher prices for the grains they produce, but that hurts the worker in the city who purchases food. Even so, the workers in Mumbai supported the peasant agitation. That is just the kind of solidarity that is so hard to even imagine at a global level. What sort of similar solidarity could possibly be envisaged between peasants in India and whoever consumes the exported basmati in metropolises abroad?

The solidarity between urban laborer and peasant in India is explained by the fact that low procurement prices for food grains creates destitution among the peasantry and forces their migration to the cities, which then, in turn, creates hardship among laborers in the city due to what Marx called the “reserve army” effect of that migration. So, it is not just in the interests of the peasantry to demand higher prices, but the laborer in the city to support this. But now can you imagine anything like this solidarity emerging in the present frameworks of political and economic culture between white workers in the cities in the United States bordering Mexico and the potentially displaced migrant from Mexico to these cities?

We are then stuck with a dilemma. Solidarities are far more feasible between working people within the borders of nations than among working people across nations, but if they are successful in bringing to power governments with social democratic resolve within their nation, that resolve is mostly unimplementable because of the quite legitimate anxieties regarding capital flight.

Have I, in making these latter observations, succumbed to just the sort of “realism” that Richard Falk is urging us to get past? To think so would be to treat Jameson’s pronouncement as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. But, on the other hand, there is no uniform answer to the question of what sorts of solidarities can and should be pursued in the current global economy. I believe the perspective of countries of the South may yield a quite different set of goals, requiring the mobilization of quite different solidarities than those of countries of the North. This is inevitable since unequal and exploitative relations continue to exist in the relations between the countries of the North and South, even after colonization.

I don’t have the space here to set up the analytical apparatus to elaborate how Falk’s aspiration to transcend the realist’s constant deflation of radical goals might be pursued despite such difficulties and constraints. However, the first and obvious step would be for movements in countries of the South to pressure *their own* governments to refuse the demands on them to pursue neoliberal policies that prohibit fiscal deficits or the increasing of taxes on wealth and corporate profit, and to impose capital controls against the outflow of finance capital. This will no doubt decrease future financial inflows, and they will have to address the problem of trade deficits that follow upon that outcome. The larger Southern economies with a wider range of resources will be able to do this by the latitude that is offered by the possibilities of diversified economies, something unavailable for the smaller economies. So, there will have to be South-South trade relations of support (a specific case of the solidarities that Falk is seeking, quite unlike the sort of elite-driven alliances exemplified by BRICS). None of this will be easy. But all fundamental transformations face the prospect of difficult periods of transition. Falk himself is admirably without illusions about this even as he urges courage and resolve—that is to say, a clear-eyed courage and resolve.

About the Author



Akeel Bilgrami is Professor of Philosophy on the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University. He works on the relation between politics and the notions of agency, value, and practical reason. His books include *Belief and Meaning*; *Self-Knowledge and Resentment*; *Secularism, Identity and Enchantment*; and the forthcoming *What is a Muslim? and Gandhi's Integrity*. He holds a PhD from the University of Chicago.

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 Akeel Bilgrami, "Capitalist Constraints on the Possible," contribution to GTI Forum "Can Human Solidarity Globalize?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-solidarity-bilgrami>.

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.