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## An “Us” without a “Them” Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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Richard Falk’s [essay](#) brings into focus the preeminent challenge of the age: the ability to imagine global human solidarity and translate this into a new social reality.

Skeptics might argue that global human solidarity—if such a thing is possible at all—will remain impossible until a host of social injustices have first been resolved. But the opposite seems more likely. The myriad injustices that currently divide humanity, which prevent us from addressing mounting existential challenges that are global in scope, will only be resolved to the extent that we recognize the underlying oneness that makes our diversity meaningful.

No other framework is capable of motivating people to fully embrace their mutual interdependence as part of one human family—which for some entails adopting an otherwise elusive willingness to sacrifice certain unfettered liberties and inherited privileges for the common good.

To understand why this is the case, consider the relationship between our interests and identities. Western liberalism assumes people who have common self-interests come together to form common identities, which enables them to work together to advance their interests, often at the expense of groups with divergent interests and hence divergent identities. According to this view, our interests shape our perceived identities. But if we interrogate this relationship closely, the reverse can also be true: our identities can shape our perceived interests.

For instance, in her award-winning study *The Heart of Altruism*, political psychologist Kristen Monroe examined twenty-five remarkable cases of altruism, including many individuals and families willing to risk their lives for total strangers. In all cases, she found one common

denominator: altruists perceived their relationship to others not in terms of interest-group ties but in terms of ties between themselves and all other human beings. “Altruists,” Monroe explains, “have a particular perspective in which all mankind is connected through a common humanity, in which each individual is linked to all others.” “Altruists,” she concluded, “share a view of the world in which all people are one.”<sup>1</sup>

What Monroe is talking about here is a globally inclusive human identity—a sense of oneness, or human solidarity—which influences perceptions of self-interest and self-sacrifice in relation to others. And this relationship between identities and interests is the reason a sense of global solidarity which values diversity is essential if we are to address the many challenges that we now face as a species. As long as we continue to understand the world primarily in terms of “us” and “them”—whatever the categories are—we will be unable to overcome our narrowly perceived self-interests and work together to create a peaceful, just, and sustainable future together.

Skeptics will argue this is impossible because all human identities are (allegedly) formed oppositionally. A global human identity would thus be impossible because there is no “other” against which a globally inclusive identity can set itself. According to this widely held view, there can be no “us” unless there is also a “them.” Such an argument, however, is pure supposition. There is no empirical evidence to support it; indeed, it is not an empirically verifiable hypothesis. Moreover, the logic upon which this argument is based is deeply flawed, as Arash Abizadeh so clearly demonstrated in an article titled “Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity.”<sup>2</sup>

As Abizadeh explains, the view that human identities must be particularist, exclusive, or oppositional traces back from Rousseau and Hegel to more contemporary thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Chantal Mouffe. This view derives from a theory of individual ego formation in which the individual ego or *self* requires mutual recognition by an external *other* in order to gain a sense of self-differentiation, self-consciousness, and self-worth. Skeptics of an inclusive global identity tacitly assume that this theory, which was developed to explain processes of *individual* identity formation, also applies to processes of *collective* identity formation. However, even if we assume that this theory is valid with respect to the differentiation of individual egos, there is no reason to believe that it explains or delimits all processes of collective identity formation.

As Abizadeh explains, “Individual socialization requires interaction with external others. But socializing an individual to identify with a collective identity could, rather obviously, simply occur through social interaction with individuals who also identify with it.” Therefore, even if we agree that there can be no “I” unless there is a “them,” it does not necessarily follow that there can be no “us” unless there is a “them.” Furthermore, even if we assume that collective identities must in some way derive from *difference*, this still does not exclude the possibility of a global human identity. As Abizadeh explains, collective identity can be “constructed on the basis of difference from hypothetical values and the imagined collective identities centered on them, or on the basis of difference from the values of a past historical identity from which one wishes to mark one’s distance. . . . humanity’s own past provides a rich and terrifying repository in contrast to which cosmopolitan identity could constitute its ‘difference.’”<sup>3</sup>

In short, the argument that all human identities are formed oppositionally and that a global human identity is impossible because there would be no “other” is neither logically defensible nor empirically verifiable. Rather, the argument derives from an inherited discourse on the particularist nature of human identities that was consolidated alongside culturally contingent processes of racial, national, ideological, and religious identity construction and differentiation—which have had disastrous consequences.

Ironically, this inherited discourse now continues to influence thinking even among progressive scholars who seek to challenge many of the injustices that stem from the increasingly dysfunctional antagonistic identity constructs that reflect and support this discourse.

A globally inclusive human identity does not exclude the possibility of other nested identities that derive from the rich diversity that characterizes humanity. We all hold multiple, overlapping, non-exclusive, partial identities based on things like gender, age, family, ethnicity, nationality, religious beliefs, occupation, personal interest, socio-economic status, and so forth. None of these partial identities necessarily preclude a sense of oneness with humanity or a commitment to act as a responsible global citizen.

A global “we” can accommodate multiple secondary distinctions between “us” and “them” when those distinctions are not understood in a hostile or adversarial manner. Moreover, it only takes one individual who identifies in this way, and acts accordingly, to disprove the hypothesis

referred to above that *all* human identities are *necessarily* exclusive or oppositional. Surely, we can all recognize the existence of individuals who invalidate this hypothesis. Some of us might even be familiar with entire communities that subordinate their communal identity to a wider solidarity with all of humanity.

## Endnotes

1. Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 198, 206.
2. Arash Abizadeh, "Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 45–60.
3. *Ibid.*, 48, 58.

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## About the Author



Michael Karlberg is Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. His research and activism focus on the need to move beyond the prevailing culture of conflict and competition in order to establish a more just and sustainable social order based on recognition of the organic oneness of humanity. His publications include *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence*; *Reframing Discourses for Peace and Justice*; *Discourse, Identity, and Global Citizenship*; *Discourse Theory and Peace*; *The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest*; and *Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression in Iran*. He holds a PhD in communication from Simon Fraser University.

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