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The Inspiring Legacy of Global Movements Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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Richard Falk's beautifully crafted [article](#) provides a sophisticated overview of the need to push beyond the current limits of imagination and politics to foster solidarity beyond the state.

Even so, the article does not get down to the specifics of how that might be achieved or, for that matter, how it has already, to a modest extent, been accomplished.

Social movements have managed, to an extraordinary degree, to form global networks of activists who have transcended nationalism in their ideas and behavior. Since the nineteenth century, there has been a remarkable efflorescence of these movements: the antislavery movement, the labor movement, the socialist movement, the peace movement, and the women's rights movement, among others. In recent decades, other global movements have emerged, preaching and embodying the same kind of human solidarity—from the environmental movement, to the nuclear disarmament movement, to the movement against corporate globalization, to the racial justice movement.

Although divided from one another, at times, by their parochial concerns, they have nevertheless been profoundly subversive of established ideas and of the established order, which have been largely devoted to maintenance of the nation-state system and special privilege. For this reason, these social movements have usually triggered a furious backlash from the political Right.

The rise of globally based social movements appears to have developed out of the growing interconnection of nations, economies, and peoples spawned by increasing world economic and technological development, trade, travel, and communications. This interconnection has

meant that war, economic collapse, climate disasters, diseases, corporate exploitation, and other problems are no longer local, but global. And the solutions, of course, must also be global in nature. Meanwhile, the possibilities for alliances of like-minded people across national boundaries have also grown.

The worldwide campaign for nuclear disarmament, the movement which I have studied most closely, had little choice but to develop on a global basis, for nuclear weapons represented a global problem that could not be tackled on a national basis. To be sure, one wing of the movement, led by Communist parties, did emphasize a national solution—nuclear disarmament by the United States, but not by the Soviet Union. Eventually, however, this one-sided approach to the nuclear menace was marginalized, and a true peoples' alliance emerged, uniting nonaligned activists in East and West against the genocidal nuclear war plans of their governments.

Much the same is true of other global social movements. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, for example, play no favorites among nations when they report on human rights abuses around the world. Individual nations, of course, selectively pick through the findings of these organizations to label their political adversaries (though not their allies) ruthless human rights abusers. But the underlying reality is that participants in these movements have broken free of allegiances to national governments to become genuine world citizens. The same can be said of activists in climate organizations like Greenpeace and 350.org, anti-corporate campaigns, the women's rights movement, and most other global social movements.

Institutions of global governance also foster human solidarity. Although this contention might appear to reverse causality, the fact is that the existence of global institutions normalizes the idea that people in diverse countries are part of the human community and, therefore, have a responsibility to one another. Furthermore, UN Secretaries-General have often served as voices of conscience to the world, deploring warfare, economic inequality, runaway climate disaster, and a host of other global ills. In recent years, portions of the political Left seem to have forgotten how global institutions generate global solidarity, both in ideas and behavior. But the political Right has not, and acts whenever it can to undermine the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the World Health Organization, and other global institutions.

Indeed, social movements and institutions of global governance often have a symbiotic relationship. The United Nations has provided a very useful locus for discussion and action on issues of concern to organizations dealing with women's rights, environmental preservation, human rights, disarmament, and other causes, with frequent conferences on these issues. Frustrated with the failure of the nuclear powers to divest themselves of nuclear weapons, nuclear disarmament organizations deftly used a series of UN conferences to push through the adoption of the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, much to the horror of nuclear-armed nations.

Admittedly, the United Nations is a confederation of nations, where the "great powers" often use their disproportionate influence—for example, in the Security Council—to block the adoption of humane, global measures that they consider against their "interests." But it remains possible to change the rules for the world body, diminishing great power influence and creating a more democratic, effective world federation of nations. Not surprisingly, there are social movements, such as the World Federalist Movement/Institute for Global Policy, working along these lines. Other global social movements and proponents of global solidarity would be well-served by supporting this campaign.

Although there are no guarantees that social movements and global governance will triumph over the predatory forces that currently dominate the world, we shouldn't ignore them either. Indeed, they can provide us with at least a measure of hope that, someday, global solidarity will prevail.

About the Author



Lawrence Wittner is Emeritus Professor of History at the State University of New York at Albany. He has written many books, including *Rebels against War*, *The Biographical Dictionary of Modern Peace Leaders*, *Peace Action*, *Working for Peace and Justice*, and the award-winning scholarly trilogy *The Struggle against the Bomb*. He has served as president of the Peace History Society and as convener of the Peace History Commission of the International Peace Research Association. He serves as co-chair of the national board of Peace Action, the largest grassroots peace organization in the United States. He holds a PhD in history from Columbia University.

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