Think Globally, Act Locally?

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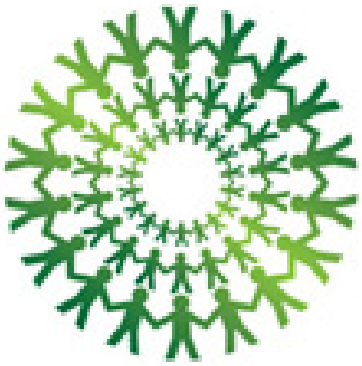

What are the strengths and weaknesses of localism? Can we synthesize the local and global? How do we achieve scale?

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Think Globally, Act Locally?

Brian Tokar

The Promise and Pitfalls of Localism

Today we are seeing an inspiring resurgence of progressive action at the local level, even as reactionary nationalist movements in Europe and beyond seek to position themselves as the true voices of a renewed localism. What are the prospects for such locally centered political engagement in a time of rising political polarization and conflict? How can local action help advance personal liberation and social justice? More broadly, how can it further our goals for global transformation?

The current upsurge of local action by both progressives and radical municipalists is fueled by several complementary impulses. First, the limitations of national politics and contemporary international institutions have caused growing frustration. The stranglehold of corporate influences—from fossil fuel interests to the financial sector—over national and transnational institutions often overwhelms resistance, whether the focus is on the US government, the European Union, or comparable structures around the world. For people seeking meaningful action on the global climate crisis, rising economic inequality, or various immediate threats to people's health and well-being, local measures often allow the most attainable initial steps toward the broader transformations we seek. Frustration with the limitations of national or transnational politics can thus be channeled toward a pragmatic pursuit of attainable steps toward justice and community renewal.

Other motivating factors are more aspirational in nature. The aim to bring important decisions closer to home reflects a desire for engagement over anonymity, right relationship over polarizing conflict, and hope for a meaningful role in decisions that affect our lives. The appeal

of "democracy begins at home" has deep historic roots, including the participatory Town Meeting structures that shaped the colonial uprising against British rule in late eighteenth-century North America. While important choices about social, environmental, and technological policies appear inherently global in character, the principle of subsidiarity—enshrined in EU legal codes among others—speaks to the widespread desire for decision-making as close to the local level as possible.

At their best, local solutions to social and environmental problems may be more amenable to an open and accessible democratic process, and their implementation can remain more accountable to those most affected by the outcomes. Local measures can help build closer relationships among neighbors and strengthen the capacity for self-reliance in a time of increasingly extreme climate-related disruptions. Local actions enable us to see that the ruling institutions that often dominate our lives may be far less essential than people tend to believe, and that we can effectively challenge regressive policies at the national and supranational levels that favor powerful outside interests. At the same time, local initiatives often raise the question of how to spark a broader social transformation that can offer a systemic change greater than the sum of its dispersed local expressions.

Indeed, the rise of regressive, nostalgic, and profoundly reactionary forms of populism around the world has served to illuminate the limitations of a politics of localism for its own sake. Some years prior to initiating the national campaign for "Brexit," the reactionary UK Independence Party proclaimed that "real decision-making should be given to local communities"—only thinly veiling an agenda to marginalize immigrants and oppose renewable energy, and even ban discussions of climate change in local schools. Racist organizations in the US South have long hidden behind localist rhetoric, as do the militia movement and other far right neo-populist formations. Suburbanites in Detroit, as well as in Southern US cities, have established new local jurisdictions to exclude people of color from decision-making and create newly segregated school districts. Wealthy homeowners in major California cities have bankrolled efforts to halt an increase in the housing supply through a statewide easing of zoning rules. In the lead-up to the recent European Parliament elections, right-populist formations came together in a new political grouping that called itself "Freedom and Direct Democracy," directly co-opting some

of the most advanced language of the emerging new radical municipalism.

How then can we steer clear of such cooptation—and best reap the benefits of the liberatory potential of local action?

Theories of Transformation

From Kurdish militants in Syria and Turkey to dynamic young organizers in North America, many current activists cite social ecology as a central underlying inspiration for their political outlook. Social ecology offers a unique synthesis of utopian social criticism, historical and anthropological investigation, dialectical philosophy, and political strategy.

The foundational texts of social ecology were written by the Vermont-based social theorist Murray Bookchin between the 1970s and 1990s. Among the first thinkers in the West to identify the growth imperative of capitalism as a fundamental threat to the integrity of living ecosystems, Bookchin consistently argued that social and ecological concerns are fundamentally inseparable. He described his distinct approach to political strategy as libertarian (or confederal) municipalism, and sometimes as communalism, highlighting the roots of key ideas in the legacy of the Paris Commune of 1871. Bookchin argued for liberated cities, towns, and neighborhoods, governed by open popular assemblies, which actively confederate in order to challenge parochialism, encourage interdependence, and build a genuine counterpower to dominant institutions.[1] Social ecologists also believe that the limits of local action and the problems of parochialism and reactionary nationalism can be overcome through confederations of cities, towns, and neighborhoods that join to advance a broad liberatory agenda.

While institutions of capitalism and the nation-state often tend to heighten social stratification and exploit divisions among people, social ecologists insist that the lived experience of direct democracy can foster expression of a general social interest that strengthens human solidarity and advances a transformative social and ecological agenda. "[I]t is from the municipality," Bookchin wrote, "that people can reconstitute themselves from isolated monads into a creative body politic and create an existentially vital…civic life that has institutional form as well as civic content: the block committees, assemblies, neighborhood organizations, cooperatives, citizens'

action groups, and public arenas for discourse that go beyond such episodic acts as demonstrations and retain a lived as well as organized community."[2] The act of civic engagement through face-to-face deliberative structures can help transcend divisions and build solidarity. Still, physical decentralization *per se* cannot guarantee progressive social transformation in the absence of an inclusive civic ethics, participatory self-governance, and a holistic ecological outlook.

For social ecologists, confederation and internal education through praxis offer essential counterpoints to localist tendencies toward provincialism and isolation. Organizers in urban neighborhoods can aim to rewrite city charters and restructure municipal governance as a confederation of directly democratic neighborhood assemblies. Then, like-minded neighborhoods, cities, and regions can continue to confederate at wider geographic levels to realize common projects, better satisfy essential needs, and ultimately create a viable counterpower to today's ruling institutions.

Another core principle of today's municipal movements is horizontalism, a political practice that aims to equalize decision-making across various sectors of society. The term (*horizontalidad* in Spanish) was first articulated during the Argentine uprising in response to the economic collapse of 2001, but has numerous historical antecedents. Prefigurative practices aimed toward dissolving social hierarchies and elevating popular voices have emerged in recent decades during periods of heightened social contestation on nearly every continent.

Further clues to an expansive conceptual framework for "glocalism" may be found in the legacy of bioregionalism. Peaking in popularity during the 1980s and early 1990s, this movement helped ecologically minded activists imagine how to transform governance so as to transcend the limits of state and national boundaries and move toward a more Earth-centered vision. Bioregionalism's ideas of governance based on watersheds rather than political boundaries have significantly shaped contemporary practice in such domains as regional planning and water resource management. Bioregionalists have also embraced a movement-of-movements approach, where advocates for various spheres of social and ecological praxis formed committees to draft proposals at biennial continental congresses, which then came before the committee of the whole for final amendment and adoption.

Finally, in an era of increasing nationalism, it is essential to heed the warnings of prominent anthropologist Arturo Escobar. At the apex of the worldwide global justice/alter-globalization movements in the early 2000s, Escobar embraced the "defense of constructions of place" by social movements that seek to advance ecological democracy, while firmly rejecting the attitudes of essentialism, nostalgia and exclusion that can tend to link "boundary making around places…to reactionary politics."[3]

Scaling Sideways and Up

Dynamic, people-powered progressive grassroots movements are on the rise in many parts of the world. Some confront corporate-driven threats to people's health and livelihoods, such as the expanding pace of fossil fuel production due to fracking and other new technologies. Indigenous and other land-based communities in the Global South actively resist the extraction of timber and mineral resources, as well as misguided climate mitigation measures, such as carbon sequestration schemes that substitute distant bureaucratic management of forests for traditional commons regimes. In France, rural workers have been in open revolt against tax policies that favor the rich, filling the streets to denounce the extreme isolation of national elites. An Irish citizens' assembly, with delegates chosen at random, launched the national referendum that ultimately voted down a long-standing constitutional ban on abortions. Here in the US, towns in some of the most conservative pockets of Pennsylvania and other states have organized to assert community rights over corporate rights, and successfully fought off expansion plans by polluting industries.

We see increasingly bold public expressions of human compassion, through the creation of sanctuaries and "cities of refuge" to protect threatened immigrants, offer direct aid, and sometimes grant local citizenship rights in defiance of exclusionary national policies. Food and farm activists are reinvigorating urban farming and regional food systems around the world, demanding food sovereignty, and advancing local alternatives that save energy and water, improve public health, empower marginalized communities, and challenge the hegemony of global agribusiness. Visionary planners, designers, and on-the-ground activists are working to reshape their cities to reduce commuting and minimize energy use. An international alliance of trade union representatives has launched a worldwide campaign to democratize energy systems under increasing public

ownership, and a youth-initiated rebellion against rising transit fares in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries helped spark a global network advocating free public transportation, among countless other recent examples.[4]

More than 2,500 cities from Oslo to Sydney have submitted plans to the United Nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, frequently in defiance of their national governments' far more cautious proposals; well over 9,000 municipalities have joined a Global Covenant of Mayors to reinforce their commitments to climate action. Some of these plans are rather modest, drawing upon cities' existing jurisdiction over matters such as zoning, building codes, and local infrastructure, but some cities are also moving to limit automobile use, expand public transportation, and accelerate the transition to renewable energy.

Furthermore, we are seeing the emergence of a grassroots "municipalist" movement that directly challenges national centers of power and raises the potential for a more thoroughly transformed political order. In cities as different as Barcelona in Spain, and Jackson in Mississippi, municipal movements rooted in well-organized neighborhoods have elected radical mayors and city councilors with a mandate to defend the rights of tenants, strengthen the public sector of the economy, and implement transformative approaches to community development.

In Jackson, an organization known as Cooperation Jackson established neighborhood assemblies and successfully ran candidates for office on a program emphasizing human rights, local democracy, and neighborhood-based economic and ecological renewal. The project is rooted in the historic legacy of Black Liberation struggles and celebrates their inspiration by movements throughout the Global South. In the heart of the war-torn Middle East, Kurdish activists along the border between Syria and Turkey have adopted a unique model of municipal governance, with a focus on equity for women and new models of ecological reconstruction.[5]

A youthful network known as Symbiosis now involves hundreds of individuals and dozens of affiliated local groups. The network's founders have facilitated several major North American gatherings on municipal politics over the past two years, and the group is now planning a congress of directly democratic municipal movements. As Symbiosis's founders explain, "[W]e can't actually make the necessarily large-scale changes without taking control over the places where we live

and creating the alternatives necessary for a new system."[6]

Progressive, locally rooted movements have long proven their ability to influence wider social and political trends, whether by force of example, concerted political pressure, or active resistance to centralized power. The passage of landmark national environmental legislation in the US in the early 1970s during the Republican administration of Richard Nixon was in part a response to the proliferation of grassroots mobilizations leading to local anti-pollution measures and lawsuits during the 1960s, with corporate interests ultimately choosing uniform national regulations over a patchwork of increasingly restrictive local measures.[7] Local measures to address inequality, such as campaigns to raise the hourly minimum wage to $15, have spread across the US, as have countless other innovative policies whose feasibility has first been demonstrated at the local level. In other cases, a heightened conflict between local values and centralized power structures brings the potential for lasting change. The idea of confederated democratic municipalities actively rebelling against centralized authorities to create revolutionary institutions of dual power is central to social ecology's communalist political strategy and to the political outlooks of several contemporary municipalist movements.

It seems clear that local action is often the best remedy for the failings and excesses of the present system, and a proven approach to catalyzing wider changes. But what about problems that are inherently global in nature? How can locally based movements provide the underpinning for the broader global transformations we seek? Can we envision networks of locally rooted continental and perhaps global structures that reflect a comprehensive vision of interdependent communities and simultaneously embody a holistic, cosmopolitan outlook and a truly humanistic general interest? How can confederations of municipally based movements begin to address the needs to redistribute wealth, transform economic systems, or manage the increasingly climate-driven crisis of migration around the world? Can they, as Bookchin insisted, tackle the fundamental question of where and with whom political power resides?

We need to strengthen forms of coordination that emerge from the municipal context to support a growing network for change in synchrony with a global resurgence of solidarity, democracy, and justice. The recent upsurge of Green politics across Europe offers one source of hope, but many

long-time Green activists are aware of how an earlier generation of Green Party functionaries in many countries succumbed to narrow electoral ambitions at the expense of the organic links to communities and social movements pointing to a more systemic alternative.[8] Confederations of democratic communities and regions need to develop new continental and global institutions that are no longer plagued by the global power politics of the UN, the narrow commercial imperatives of the WTO, nor the technocratic managerialism of the EU. Through creative experimentation, visionary forms of action, and life-affirming political struggle, we can discover ways to resist the tides of reaction and climate-driven collapse, and point the way toward a different world.

Today's increasingly severe climate disruptions are beginning to universalize the sense of precariousness long experienced by the earth's most vulnerable peoples. If current trends continue, we face a grim future of ever-diminishing returns and a capitalist race to the bottom, with increasingly extreme deprivation on a global scale. But there is a better path. The odds may be diminishing

with each passing year of climate inaction, but it is more necessary than ever to sustain a hope that humanity can unite to reject authoritarian false solutions to the climate crisis and social inequities, embrace the potential for an enhanced quality of life beyond fossil-fueled capitalism, and begin to realize the dream of a liberated and truly interdependent global community of communities.

Endnotes

1. These ideas are explored in detail in Murray Bookchin, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (London: Verso, 2015).

2. Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), 283.

3. Arturo Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization," *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 139, 149–150.

4. See http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org and https://freepublictransport.info/.

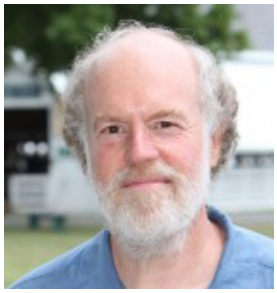
5. See, inter alia, Internationalist Commune of Rojava, *Make Rojava Green Again* (London: Dog Section Press, 2018), and Meredith Tax, "The Revolution in Rojava," *Dissent*, April 22, 2015, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-revolution-in-rojava.

6. Symbiosis Research Collective, "How Radical Municipalism Can Go Beyond the Local," *The Ecologist*, June 8, 2018, https://theecologist.org/2018/jun/08/how-radical-municipalism-can-go-beyond-local. See also https://www.symbiosis-revolution.org.

7. This history is explained in Chapter 3 of my book *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash* (Boston: South End Press, 1997).

8. See my "The Greens as a Social Movement: Values and Conflicts," in *Green Parties: Reflections on the First Three Decades*, edited by Frank Zelko and Carolin Brinkmann (Washington, DC: Heinrich Böll Foundation of North America, 2006).

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.

Panel

How to Privilege the Local

David Barkin

The debate about global transformation has often been characterized by seemingly irreconcilable positions about local and global action. It might be worthwhile to try to simplify this gap. On the one hand, we have an unending search for ways to forge a single global culture based on certain universal principles that emerged from the cumulative contributions of centuries of idealistic proponents hoping to lay the foundations for reconciling the different value systems and relationships that societies have developed over the centuries with their environs, with the planet on which they depend. Many of these luminaries made important contributions, directing people's energies towards the construction of new institutions and ways of living that offer a better quality of life while trying to care for the environment and the myriad other species with which we share the planet.

On the other hand, we can observe the perseverance and flourishing of countless local cultures and ways of life that organize production and social interactions among peoples on the margins of the seemingly overwhelming penetration of the global capitalist system. These disparate groups have evolved for centuries, millennia, sometimes escaping from the centripetal forces of history, sometimes adapting, suffering, or succumbing to the destructive agents of integration, be they imperial, colonial, or capital. For some time, these groups have been emerging from their isolation, thrusting asunder the shackles, or reconstructing societies capable of different forms of organization. Many are overcoming the limitations imposed by the present system of nation-states, carving out their own territories, sometimes with the agreement of these institutions, other times in spite of their prohibitions. Called native lands, protected areas, conservation offsets, or spiritual reserves, the officially recognized areas now comprise more than one-quarter of the total land area of the planet; if we were to add the areas controlled by peasant groups, actively involved in creating their own areas in which to flourish

(e.g., La Via Campesina), the area represents much more of the world.[1]

A significant part of our discussion of the global versus the local is mired in an endless debate about how we might construct a better world. The ongoing experiences of thousands of communities around the world that are already engaged in their own programs for forging viable societies to improve their quality of life while protecting their ecosystems. These peoples, numbering hundreds of millions, or perhaps many more, are not waiting for the institutions that oppress them to fail, or for the walls that enclose them to crumble. Although many must devote considerable energies to prosecuting the demanding struggles to resist the inroads of capitalist expansion, many of them have remarkably clear visions of the worlds to which they aspire. Brian Tokar refers to the astonishing resilience of the Kurds, which involves not just a prolonged military struggle but also an optimistic vision of their future, tearing down many shibboleths including, not the least, of a patriarchal society.

The early contribution of Ivan Illich is especially relevant. In his *Tools for Conviviality*, he drew a roadmap for understanding the possibilities of constructing many new worlds. Conviviality is a platform for the forging of a new society, one that transcends the profound limitations of our present world, to move towards a socialism that would require "an inversion of our present institutions and the substitution of convivial for industrial tools." This new framework "will remain a pious dream unless the ideals of socialist justice prevail." He goes on to highlight a position common to many of today's social movements: "the present crisis of our major institutions … abridge basic human freedom for the sake of providing people with more institutional outputs…A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favor of another member's equal freedom." This is crucial: although a convivial world does not lead to an equal society, traditional as well as new economic devices would be needed to "keep the net transfer of power within bounds."[2]

It should not be surprising that many of the communities involved in these local struggles are actively engaging in solidarity movements with their counterparts in their own parts of the world, and with other internationally.[3] We need to generate an encompassing dynamic of inclusion—spaces in which an enormous variety of local approaches to human and

environmental well-being are already under construction. The sharing of these experiences and the search for mutual reinforcement on a global scale is precisely what is required to privilege the local. [4]

Endnotes

1. Stephen Garnett, et al. "A Spatial Overview of the Global Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation," *Nature Sustainability* 1, no. 7 (2018): 369–374.

2. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Perennial Library, 1973), 12, 17.

3. A recent compilation of very short essays that brings together some of the most original thinking about the ways in which these alternatives are being woven together can be found in Ashish Kothari, et al., *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019).

4. For more on this approach, see David Barkin and Alejandra Sánchez, "The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject: New Forms of Social Transformation," *Third World Quarterly* (2019).

About the Author

David Barkin is a professor at the Metropolitan University in Mexico City, where he has taught since 1975, and an emeritus member of the National Research Council and the Academy of Sciences in Mexico. He has taught in many countries, including the US, France, Spain, Cuba, and Chile, and has published 22 books and more than 200 referred articles in scientific journals. His research focuses on ecological economics, alternative paradigms for society, and the problems of indigenous societies, with whom he collaborates in creating designs for alternative futures. His work is oriented to having an impact on the daily lives of marginal peoples in Latin America and in changing the dominant paradigms in the academy.

Large-Scale Frameworks, Small-Scale Solutions

David Bollier

Thanks to Brian Tokar for his wonderful overview of the promise and pitfalls of localism. I would like to offer a few observations.

I think the global/local binary is a misleading framework for this discussion because the very term "global" prejudices our understanding of the local. Globalization has been associated for so long with being a force for "development," human progress, social emancipation, etc., that the local is inevitably seen as a direct antithesis—small-scale, backward, parochial. By implication, the local is also seen as politically marginal—a sideshow to national politics and global geopolitics. While many of us clearly have a different sense of the term "local," it continues to have a whiff of sentimental regression and even nostalgia in the public mind. It is seen as a foil to modernity (which may be exactly what some of us want, but not in the conventional sense).

I find the global/local binary misleading for another reason. The behaviors, culture, identities, and markets that manifest at the local level are not truly independent of larger national and global systems. Telecommunications, transport, and capital flows have fed global integration, radically challenging the very meaning of the local in the process. The local and global have blurred into each other. While our biophysical bodies may indeed be inescapably local—we all need to live somewhere—our subjectivities, commitments, and working collaborations often have a wider, more complicated scope.

For example, in recent years cosmo-local production has emerged as a new mode of design and manufacturing.[1] "Light" knowledge can be shared and developed globally, in an open-source fashion via the Internet, while "heavy" physical things can be produced locally in less expensive, modular ways using non-proprietary designs. This innovative approach to design

and production—now being used to produce motor vehicles, houses, furniture, and agricultural equipment—has potentially important ramifications for efficient, eco-friendly production and local self-reliance. But we are not likely to see such possibilities if our thinking is controlled by geographic categories.

Let's admit that the global/local polarity is itself an imaginary with a problematic history. It has been a way of dividing the nations of the world into "developed" and "developing," modern and backward, scientific and superstitious. As we are discovering, the binary is dangerously flawed because it is not grounded in biophysical or geophysical realities at all, let alone cultural respect, but in the political designs of capital and state power. In his recent book *Down to Earth*, the French scholar of modernity Bruno Latour decries the global/local duality and calls for a new imaginary—the "Terrestrial"—that would focus our attention on ecosystems as the foundation for economies and culture.[2]

Having said all this, it is difficult to stop using the term "local" because it is an easy, shorthand way of expressing our desire for deeper, more meaningful relations with our neighbors and natural systems. Moreover, "local" is a term we may need to fight for. The term is being claimed by right-wing authoritarian movements and corporate marketers. When the Whole Foods supermarket chain (now owned by Amazon) markets its vegetables, beef, and fish as "local," they mean that it comes from within a 350-mile radius. While corporations are rushing to embrace localism as a fresh marketing signal for wholesome and trustworthy, I fear the term may become the next empty buzzword after "sustainable."

The real point here may be that we need a vocabulary that means much more than "situated in the local geography" or "driven by ordinary people." We need a discourse that means "protected against global capitalists who treat everything as alienable for market purposes." The fundamental problem is that various localist movements have not yet come to a shared understanding of how to pursue this principle. We lack a shared, coherent political discourse about how to keep our common wealth inalienable and accessible to everyone. To be sure, there are many relocalization movements that are committed to these goals. But not enough bridges have been built among diverse localists to develop a lingua franca and a shared vision for federated action.

Having lived and worked as an activist/scholar focused on the commons for many years, I see great value in this meta-discourse as a way to help bring together disparate players. The great breakthrough that allowed the Internet to arise was a set of software protocols known as TCP/IP (short for "transmission control protocol/Internet protocol"), which provided a way for digital networks with very different technical standards to interconnect and communicate reliably. So today, various relocalization movements need to develop a cultural analog of TCP/IP to help local actors interconnect and inhabit a common space. We need ways to assert solidarity and cooperative aspirations even while honoring our different practices, histories, and identities. I see great potential in the language of commoning because it honors the indispensable role of context, history, culture, and local circumstances while at the same time showcasing the recurrent patterns that manifest in different struggles against capitalism.[3]

The late social critic David Fleming, author of *Lean Logic*, describes our challenge well: "Large-scale problems do not require large-scale solutions; they require small-scale solutions within a large-scale framework." I think those of us committed to local action need to give more thought to how to develop a large-scale framework that can align and knit together our diverse, smaller-scale initiatives and movements. I would start by trying to develop stronger working relationships, a shared discourse, and translocal infrastructures for mutual support.

Endnotes

1. "Design Global, Manufacture Local," P2P Foundation wiki, https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Design_Global,_Manufacture_Local.

2. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime* (Boston: Polity, 2019).

3. J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Beyond Global vs. Local."

4. David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2019).

5. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985); Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: On the Real and the Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2020). See also https://www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org.

About the Author

David Bollier is an author, activist, blogger, and independent scholar who has studied the commons as a new paradigm of economics, politics, and culture for the past fifteen years. He pursues this work primarily as co-founder of the Commons Strategies Group, a consulting project that assists the international commons movement, and as co-director of the Commons Law Project, which is seeking to regenerate the legal traditions for protecting the commons. He is the author of *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, *Green Governance: Ecological Survival*, and *Human Rights and the Law of the Commons* (with Burns H. Weston), and the editor of *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, an anthology of essays produced with co-editor Silke Helfrich.

Global Identity Is Real

Andreas Bummel

Collapsing the global into the local, as Arturo Escobar does in his comment, is neither necessary nor useful. It is true that everyone has a local position in space and time which is the starting point for any action. However, this position is not fixed and, in fact, can move quite frequently. In addition, technology and interdependence have intermeshed positions and scales so that actions have impacts beyond the local. Even without such tangible interdependence, philosophical thought across the world's regions—ancient Greek Stoic philosophy, the Tamil Sangam literature, the Hindu Upanishads, the Confucian thought of the "Great Unity," and so on-- has stressed the inherent connection of all human beings wherever they may be. Humans may be rooted locally, but their minds may embrace a global perspective based on inclusion. Clearly, solidarity and empathy can and do often expand beyond the immediate locality and identity. Recent surveys show that large majorities across the world accept the notion of global citizenship that carries global rights and responsibilities. Identity is built upon many different loyalties, layers, and outlooks that have different weights, priorities, and reaches for each individual. This often includes a global identity.

If people feel and express a global identity that makes them part of the larger human family, this cannot be undone by simply stating that the global does not exist. This is an odd claim in light of the existence of international law, international institutions, international relations, and global decision-making. Then, there are global public goods such as the atmosphere. There are formal governance structures at different levels from the local to the global: municipalities, cities, counties, provinces, states, federal states, subregional and regional international communities, continental agreements and bodies, and finally all of the institutions of the UN system and global governance.

I agree that local action is key, but it is not exclusively so because local action in many important areas is determined by governance and decision-making structures that are beyond the local. Consider nuclear disarmament and collective security as two examples. The principle of subsidiarity offers useful guidance. Decision-making should be located at the lowest possible level of governance that is still able to deliver effective solutions. Subsidiarity in many cases may imply decentralization and moving decision-making closer to the local. However, in other cases, it may also imply the necessity to move beyond the nation-state upwards to global decision-making structures. All structures must be as democratic, accountable, transparent, and inclusive as possible, and this applies especially to those that are global. These structures already exist, but they do not meet such criteria.

It is necessary to build stronger connections between the local and the global. This is one of the reasons why we need a UN Parliamentary Assembly so that UN members will be accountable to their local constituencies. Soon we will launch a campaign that promotes the instrument of a UN World Citizens' Initiative that will allow a number of global (sic!) citizens to formally present proposals to the UN General Assembly.

About the Author

Andreas Bummel is co-founder and global coordinator of the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, which advocates democratic representation of the world's citizens at the UN and the institutions of global governance. The campaign has been endorsed by 1,500 sitting and former lawmakers from over 100 countries. He has authored numerous publications, spoken at events around the world, and organized relevant conferences on the subject, and he is the author of a forthcoming book on the project of a world parliament. He has been a council member of the World Federalist Movement–Institute for Global Policy, a fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science, and an honorary member of the Society for Threatened Peoples.

The Global Doesn't Exist

Arturo Escobar

My brief note is a bit counterintuitive, since it concerns the potential dissolution of the global/local binary. In deconstructing this binary, I am in no way suggesting that my comments represent a "more correct view," but merely introducing some queries about the categories.

My hypothesis is based on the following premises:

(1) The "global" is an artifact of the heteropatriarchal modern capitalist ontology of separation of place and space (among other constitutive dualisms) necessary for the appropriation, normalization, and at times obliteration of what it construes and actively constitutes as "the local." Strictly speaking, the global doesn't exist.[1]

(2) The world based on the ontology of the global and its attendant political economy—which assumes the intrinsic existence of nested sub-scales that the global inevitably "penetrates"—is facing a civilizational crisis of its own making. Central to this crisis is its massive defuturing effect, which negates places, regions, and countries the possibility of multiple futures and futures-in-difference.[2]

(3) If the world is a web of radical interdependence, it follows that all local, place-based, and communal struggles are already interconnected, even if they might not know it. There is no "scaling up" to be achieved because there is no "up" to be found. We need to imagine a different politics consistent with this deeply relational vantage point. Such politics might enable us to expand the field of what we consider possible.

(4) Transitions beyond a world/framework of a powerful "global" and multiple subordinated "locals," unable to confront "the global" at the same colossal level of scale, should aim to

dissolve the binary altogether, in both political discourse and practice. Only then will the radically transformative force of communal, place-based and otherwise "local" struggles and alternatives be fully appreciated.

On the Promise and Pitfalls of Globalism/Localism

Feminist standpoint epistemology has taught us that all knowledge is socially and historically situated. This also follows from indigenous knowledge traditions, where the knower often makes it clear that what s/he knows is from embodied experience and place. If there is no "thinking globally," there is no global.

"But there are real global processes!" readers may reply. Fair enough. Developments in physics, molecular biology, chemistry, and material science have enabled novel economic and social processes (unprecedented energy supply, transportation, widespread markets, and real-time communications, etc.) and the rise of allegedly globalized network societies. Science, technology, and the artificial have become the infrastructures of what counts as globalization. It is patently clear by now that they are also deeply implicated in the creation of the most efficient systems of exploitation and extraction the planet has seen. The current global phase is not necessarily a long-lasting state.

Social ecology's compelling vision of radical municipalism reverses the asymmetry between the global and the local. It weakens the imaginary of an all-powerful global through its call for an open-ended notion of "confederations of cities, towns, and neighborhoods that join to advance a broad liberatory agenda" (to quote Brian Tokar). At play is a different way of understanding the relation between place, locality, and direct democracy.

Visions highlighting place and locality are often considered insufficient to confront the crisis. Geographers Gibson-Graham have exposed the globalocentric nature of these critiques. Most of the critics, they suggest, "see *the world* as taken over by global capitalism," or in terms of "a dominant discourse of globalization that is setting the political and policy agenda….[T]he power of globalization seems to have colonized their political imaginations."[3] This masculinist thinking assumes a world made up of One World, hence one real and one possible. Moving

towards the realization of multiple reals/possibles is an antidote to either unexamined or lingering globalocentric thinking; it enables us to consider the becoming of the place-based and the local in new forms.

Theories of Transformation

How do we talk about what we used to refer to as "global forces" or "systemic change"? Gibson-Graham imaginatively speak of a homeopathic politics, that of healing multiple locals through communal economies and logics connecting up into diffuse but sustaining forms of translocal meshworked power. This echoes recent calls for a pluriversal politics.[4] The doubts persist: Is pluriversal politics a workable horizon for action? Is the construction of autonomous spaces from below sufficient to make a dent on heteropatriarchal capitalist domination? Are not place-based, communal logics also central to the subordination of women and youth? Are they not re-inscribed into modernist norms of capital and the State? At the heart of these questions is the criteria for assessing the effectivity of transformation strategies. Thinking in terms of articulations, convergences, bridge-building, and rhizomic and meshworked processes of connection among transformative alternatives, while a starting point, is crucial so that these alternatives are not dismissed as unviable or as non-credible alternatives to what exists. "Radiating out" horizontalism, rather than scaling-up, may organize a new view of social change. Glocalism and bioregionalism are notions seeking to give more power to place and "region." These meso-levels are useful for imagining grassroots-driven local and regional transitions, though they should not be taken as intrinsically existent, but as the emergent result of enactments of new politics of the real and the possible. Many technologies can be reoriented towards convivial societies through deglobalizing and re-futuring co-design transition strategies.

Scaling Sideways and Up

Concepts of scale are not central to many of the most accomplished social transformation frameworks, such as social ecology or, say, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's theory of radical democracy. They are not central to Latin American theories of *autonomía* and communality.[5] As the Zapatistas put it, the way to achieve a world where many worlds fit is by building

autonomous communities in place, following the principle of One No (to neoliberal globalization and the patriarchal capitalist hydra) and Many Yeses (multiple transformative alternatives). If "the global" is going to be anything at all, it should be the result of a politics of solidarity across place-based and regional struggles, in all directions (south, north, east, west), more that up/down. This may also be a path for a journey to Earthland.

Endnotes

1. I draw on insights in human and economic geography about the "flattening" of scale (so-called "flat ontologies") and on critiques of ontological dualism in anthropology, geography, and political philosophy. I also strongly believe that similar conclusions can be arrived at through a careful listening of grassroots political and knowledge practices, particularly some ethnic, ecological, and feminist struggles. For the debates in geography, see Sally Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woorward, "Human Geography without Scale," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography* 30 (2005): 416-432; and K. Gibson-Graham, "Beyond Global vs. Local: Economic Politics outside the Binary Frame," in *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*, edited by Andrew Herod and Melissa Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 25-60.

2. Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: University of South Wales Press, 1999).

3. J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Beyond Global vs. Local."

4. See, for example, Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, eds., *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Delhi: Authors UpFront/Tulika, 2019).

5. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985); Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: On the Real and the Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2020). See also https://www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org.

About the Author

Arturo Escobar is the Kenan Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a Research Associate with the Culture, Memory, and Nation group at Universidad del Valle, Cali. His main interests are political ecology, ontological design, and the anthropology of development, social movements, and technoscience. Over the past twenty-five years, he has worked closely with several Afro-Colombian social movements, particular the Process of Black Communities (PCN). He is author of the well-known book *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, and more recently, Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes and *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, among others.

Localism in Good and Hard Times

Frank Fischer

Localism, in my view, is not about giving priority to the local. The issue is rather about the need to bring it more fully back into the fold. Localism was from the outset basic to the environmental movement, with writers such as Murray Bookchin, Kirkpatrick Sale, and Rudolf Bahro advocating regionalism, communes, and ecovillages. This orientation was seen as anything but a retreat from wider social and environmental struggles. Bookchin, for example, saw it as a way to begin taking back power from the unsustainable center. His confederal/libertarian municipalism, as Brian Tokar underscores, was put forward as a strategy to "challenge parochialism, encourage interdependence, and build a genuine counterpower to dominant institutions" from where "the growth imperative of capitalism" could be radically challenged.

Similarly, Bahro, who established and lived in an ecovillage, was a founder of the German Green Party, which came to have a long reach beyond the local level. A tireless opponent of the global capitalist "megamachine," he saw the eco-commune as the "germ-cell" of a new social form that could eventually replace the existing bureaucratic state.

Reasserting the Local

As environmentalism shifted the struggle—necessarily—to global environmental politics, localism took a back seat in environmental thinking. As the crisis is global, so the argument goes, the solutions have to be global. Although the local dimension didn't disappear altogether, it lost its luster as attention turned to the global stage. Only later, when the failures of national and global efforts started to become apparent, did a growing number of people start to think seriously again about the local. The emphasis turned mainly to the role of cities as the front line of climate crisis, especially to mitigate the consequences.

We all live locally, whether in urban or rural localities. Our local home thus needs to be an essential part of the larger ecological system. While there is a growing literature that rediscovers the importance of the local level, much of it unfortunately conceptualizes the local as a subsystem of the global system. This is not entirely wrong, but it fails to recognize that the local is more than just a delivery system for programs from above. It has a life of its own, a dynamic independent of the global system.

Localism, to be sure, has a long history, having been advocated in our time by ecologists such as E. F. Schumacher, Wendell Berry, and Bookchin. Such writers have emphasized the many promises associated with localism—sense of place, community, conviviality, local culture, identity, local production, food networks, self-sufficiency, local political control, face-to face discussions, participatory democracy, and more. It is also an important site for environmental action and implementation of sustainability. An emphasis on local communities and the role of their activists has always been an essential part of the theory of sustainable development, even if it has all-too-often only received lip service.

But these are promises with no guarantees. Developing a viable form of localism does not just happen because it is local. Local communities can be narrow-minded, provincial, socially oppressive, unjust, corrupt, and undemocratic. In this regard, the politics of relocalization can be understood as a variant of the general struggle for political and environmental change. Realizing the promises depends on particular conditions, commitments, and hard work on the part of citizens and activists.

Localism beyond the Dichotomy

The argument that localization walks away from global environmental politics is, in my experience, wrong. While there are always exceptions, localists, especially those following in the aforementioned traditions, broadly recognize the need for global action. Most local thinkers and activists do not see this as an either/or. We all are situated somewhere locally, as he points out, and this position is an important source of initiative and action. As the Transition Town and ecovillage movements have shown, local action is flexible. Local places are where people can get personally involved with their neighbors and, as Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition

movement, put it, roll up their sleeves and start "doing stuff." In the process, they often become activated, even sometimes radicalized. Part of that engagement is learning to understand the connections between local and the global spaces. Helping climate refugees find local shelter easily leads to active concerns about global warming. Such involvement, moreover, works to counter the fact that the average citizen sees the global as distant, something to read about in the newspaper, something for international elites and experts to deal with.

Localism for Hard Times

There is yet another dimension to the relocalization movement that is overlooked. I think it is unlikely in the time available that we will be able to avoid major disasters, if not outright collapse. The "Great Unraveling" is a topic that many are reluctant to talk about, comfortably situated academics in particular. People prefer to emphasize the positive rather than the negative, which one can understand. But, in my view, it is time to look the probable disasters of the crisis in the face. Confronting a downward spiral, large numbers of people will need ideas and practical knowledge about how to deal with the desperate circumstances in which they find themselves. The need to act will then overshadow theoretical discussions about global transition. Localism in its various forms, especially the ecovillage movement, speaks very directly to this need for viable alternatives.

History shows that people faced with the consequences of crisis at the center seek to escape by returning to the land, both to flee social and political turmoil and to feed themselves. In the future, just as in the past, growing numbers of people will be forced to leave unlivable cities and head for the land. For many, this will be more a matter of hard necessity than a question of choice. Desperate people will be in a search of ways to cope with the hardships that will come with climate disasters, if not simply to survive. Today we can see signs of such movement in European countries such as Greece which have confronted extremely severe financial hardships and high levels of unemployment. The phenomenon is also evident in wide parts of Eastern Europe still struggling to deal with post-Soviet transition.

Many find it advantageous to move back to the land with their families and friends, where they can cooperatively grow their own food, in many cases to achieve a basic level of subsistence. Most urban dwellers, in the advanced industrial world in any case, know little or nothing about living

on the land, including the knowledge necessary to grow their own food. But hungry people will learn, even if not overnight. This is where a range of alternative forms of living can be significant, in particular those organized around sustainable farming and the communal life of the ecovillage. We find here people who have already been experimenting with new and old ways to do things, similar to what Hopkins has referred to as the "Great Reskilling." They have developed a wealth of local knowledge that is readily transferable to people confronting climate-related hardships. This includes practical knowledge about living well with less material stuff, but also a large amount of social knowledge about communal living, collective learning, sharing income, and making decisions by participatory democracy, none of which are easy under any circumstances. The members of ecovillages are fully aware of what is ahead and the need to provide useful information to hard pressed people, a concern they discuss quite often. They understand themselves as developing knowledge that can be passed along as lessons to those looking for new ways to organize their lives, especially people fleeing climate disasters.

For me, this is one of the places where progressive theorizing meets concrete practical action. It was for this reason that I previously suggested that we pay more attention to these critically important experiments in localism. This does mean that these activities are a substitute for global struggle. The goal is rather to build stronger connections between the local and the global. A sustainable transition needs both efforts. Chella Rajan is right when he argues that people-environment interactions require conjoined actions betwen both levels of governance. This means that an effective strategy, as Helena Norberg-Hodge puts it, has to be both bottom-up and top-down at the same time.

About the Author

Frank Fischer is a research scholar at both the Institute of Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam and Humboldt University in Berlin, as well as an Emeritus Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at Rutgers University. His research focuses on environmental policy and public policy; American politics, including US foreign policy; public policy analysis; politics of climate change; scientific expertise and democratic governance; and US foreign policy. He is a co-editor of the journal *Critical Policy Studies* and the author of such books as *Evaluating Public Policy*; *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge*; *Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities*; and the forthcoming *Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy*. Fischer received his PhD from New York University.

Putting Power in Its Place

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

Any discussion about global and local needs to look hard at the systems and structures responsible for our current crisis to be meaningful.

The three global systems which hold primary responsibility for runaway inequality and climate change are, in order of importance, (1) the international monetary system and global banks, (2) the U.S. military, and (3) the fossil fuel companies. A fourth system which obviously needs to change is global agribusiness. However, the difference between agribusiness and the other three is that the first three we could live without altogether. We have yet to figure out how to live without food, though. We lived without money, banks, fossil fuels, and weapons of mass destruction for millennia. We can do it again.

In small ways, local and regional solutions can help mitigate monetary system dysfunction, but they can't change the larger system. The US military needs to be curtailed through mass-movement, non-violent revolutionary change in the US. The fossil fuel industry straddles the local and the global—local solutions can render them obsolete, but at the same time, we need to significantly outlaw and constrain the industry on an international scale.

Power is real. The large global institutions and systems have it; people don't. An enormous amount of integration, mutual aid, and organization would be required for a federated collection of local communities to achieve the same kind and level of power needed to confront these institutions. I don't think we have time for that to happen.

Perhaps we need to embrace a different kind of power on all levels to provide a timely, effective transformation. Maybe we need a compendium of strategies and practices on all levels to guide

an organic and multifaceted cultural shift. We need to shift to sharing from owning, to mutual aid from monetary dominance, to fair markets from monopolism and exploitation, to deeply ethical business practices from rampant corruption, to measuring well-being and peace from the patriarchal and competitive measuring stick known as GDP.

I wince every time I hear the question "It sounds good, but can it scale?" We are all too enamored with large, centralized structures and solutions for things that can and should be addressed on the local level, and too silent and totally ineffective on those things that need collective national and international action. This is at least in part because the centralized, consolidated monetary power prefers centralized, hierarchical systems to maintain its power and control.

The large institutions are dinosaurs. We have reached peak patriarchy, peak debt, and peak oil, and we're headed fast for peak extinction. We are now an endangered species. The dinosaurs will fall as the fiery storm engulfs them. The smaller institutions which have started to live in the real world, a world that does not assume endless exponential economic growth, endless war, and world-dominating power might survive, and therein is the promise of localism. Not a localism which can somehow become global, but one that is uniquely suited to its place, its culture, its connection to the real new world.

About the Author

Gwendolyn Hallsmith has over thirty years of experience working with municipal, regional, and state government in the United States and internationally. She is the author of six books on community resilience and sustainable economics. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy in 2012, and is currently working on legislation for a Vermont State Bank. She lives in an ecovillage in Cabot, Vermont, called the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, where she and her husband write topical songs about the new economy for their small musical group called The New Economistas. She has a Master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University and studied theology at the Andover Newton Theological School.

Two Arguments for Localism

Richard Heinberg

Argument 1: Localism is inevitable.

Globalization was made possible by long-distance transport, communications, and capital flows. It fits with widespread assumptions about progress and economic growth leading to a better future. But there are good reasons to think that our current bout of globalization is actually a brief, fragile, and highly problematic phase of human history.

Societies seem to pass through a "secular cycle" in which they grow in size and interconnectedness, but then experience instability and decline, becoming more decentralized and isolated once again. This secular cycle mirrors the adaptive cycle discussed in ecological literature, wherein ecosystems pass through phases of *exploitation* (in which total biomass, energy capture, and species interconnectivity all grow), *conservation* (where biomass, interconnectivity, and energy capture reach a peak, but at the expense of system resilience), *release* (a fairly sudden loss of biomass, energy capture, and connectivity), and *reorganization* (in which pioneer species begin a recovery, opening the way for a new exploitation phase).

Our current global society appears to be in the conservation phase of its adaptive cycle: it is at a peak of scale and integration. If the cyclical behavior of past societies is repeated in ours, recent trends toward globalization and urbanization will reach natural limits and be reversed. The inflection point may not be far in the future. Factors potentially leading to a loss of connectivity are growing in number, including environmental degradation (climate change, biodiversity loss, widespread plastics and petrochemical pollution), resource depletion (topsoil, fresh water, minerals), and over-reliance on debt to maintain economic growth.

Another factor that is likely to be decisive is energy supply. The integration and scaling of social systems have required enormous and expanding amounts of energy, and our current energy system is about 25 times larger than the global energy system that existed at the start of the industrial revolution.

This system is entirely unsustainable in terms of its sources (86 percent of current energy comes from depleting, climate-destabilizing fossil fuels) and therefore almost certainly in terms of its scale as well. While a one-to-one replacement of energy from fossil sources with energy from alternative sources may be theoretically possible, substitution is not happening at remotely the rate needed to avert serious environmental impacts from climate change or economic impacts from fossil fuel depletion. With less energy, we will eventually see less trade and transport (though perhaps global communication networks could be maintained, if scaled back).

In sum, a reversion to a more localized form of social organization is an entirely predictable consequence of past and current trends. It therefore makes sense to start thinking about how localization could be accomplished in ways that maximize benefits and minimize costs.

Argument 2: Localism is desirable.

The past few decades have seen many social movements advocating localization, driven mostly by concerns for equity, human rights, and environmental protection (as still-local indigenous communities struggle to maintain their way of life in the face of globalization). From "Buy Local" campaigns in communities across the US to "Transition Town" initiatives and nonprofit advocacy organizations like Local Futures, this work has sprung largely from the theoretical foundations of bioregionalism laid down in the 1970s and 1980s. Localism is largely a corrective to the depredations and excesses of corporate globalization, but there is more to it than that.

As Sebastian Junger argues in his influential book *Tribe*, humans evolved living in small groups and function best in contexts where they know one another face-to-face. It is in our communities where we (as individuals, families, businesses, and organizations of all kinds) most directly interact with the people and institutions that make up our society. And it is where we are most affected by the decisions that society makes. When political and social entities grow in size, the likelihood of power concentration increases. And people tend to handle lots of power poorly.

The only sure way to keep power inequality from causing extreme injustice and social instability is to keep the scale of social organization small.

Moreover, we work hardest to protect places we know and love. "Nature" is an abstraction, but the urge to protect one's home is powerful. That is why place-based conservation efforts (such as local land and farm trusts, community parks, and publicly managed commons) are often more effective than campaigns by distant city dwellers to save rainforests and emblematic species on the far side of the planet.

Much of the best climate change mitigation work is happening at the local level. In the national and international arena, political polarization and the power of the fossil fuel lobby have prevented strong action, but in local communities—where citizens can talk face-to-face—climate action has been easier to achieve. For example, where I live (Sonoma County, California) all cities have signed on to decarbonization goals far more ambitious than ones adopted at the federal level during the Obama administration.

Of course, localism won't automatically solve all our problems. Anyone who has ever worked in local politics or a grassroots organizing campaign knows that corruption, polarization, and power grabs can afflict even the smallest communities. Some local environmental and community welfare efforts succeed; others fail.

Further, many of the world's current counter-globalization trends appear steeped in parochialism, right-wing populism, and racism. Brexit and the efforts of the current US administration to build a wall on the nation's southern border seem to be driven largely by fear and distrust of immigrants and refugees—attitudes that are worrisome in the context of growing flows of people from the Global South fleeing climate chaos and increasing political instability. I would argue that these are signs that the recent cycle of global integration has already run its course. We can't buck the tide of history. Our task is not to resist localism, but to push for a humane localism—to make the most of its opportunities, while avoiding as much as possible its potential pitfalls. If the inevitable trend toward localism is not led by those who are pro-social and visionary, it will instead be led by the worst opportunists.

In the best instance, communities can benefit from localism by sharing and cooperating across geographic boundaries through informal networks, as Transition Towns have done. However, it is by no means assured that electricity grids and global communications can be maintained over the long run, as energy and financial flows decline chaotically. While we still benefit from those global flows, it makes sense to push for worldwide climate agreements and other sane policies. Global movements along these lines (e.g., Extinction Rebellion) can benefit from diverse voices and strategies arising from, and aligned with, local concerns and existing regional organizations. But it also makes sense to envision and plan for a peaceable, compassionate, and virtuous path down the ladder of societal scale.

The bottom line: Even if you find argument 2 less than convincing, argument 1 is probably not negotiable. A Great Unraveling is in store, and has evidently already commenced. How shall we navigate it?

About the Author

Richard Heinberg is a Senior Fellow of the Post Carbon Institute and is widely regarded as one of the world's foremost Peak Oil educators. He is the author of twelve books, including *Afterburn: Society Beyond Fossil Fuels*, *Snake Oil*, *The End of Growth*, and *Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines*. He has appeared in many film and television documentaries, including Leonardo DiCaprio's *11th Hour*, and is a recipient of the M. King Hubbert Award for Excellence in Energy Education. His animations *Don't Worry, Drive On*; *Who Killed Economic Growth?*; and *300 Years of Fossil Fuels in 300 Minutes* have been viewed by 1.75 million people. Since 2002, he has delivered more than five hundred lectures to a wide variety of audiences—from insurance executives to peace activists, from local and national elected officials to Jesuit volunteers.

The Pragmatism of Thinking Globally

Meg Holden

When the catchphrase "Think Globally, Act Locally" rose to prominence amongst those who brought the global environmental and human development catastrophe to global attention around the time of the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, it was the second part of the slogan that came across as radical. The assumption amongst activists and those who would, more generally, express concern with the weight of world problems and the collision course of human development and environmental agendas was that the appeal and the significance of thinking globally was a foregone conclusion, a done deal. It turns out, in our present political moment, that the priorities have reversed. It is the thinking globally part that progressive people now need to fight for, that has become the more radical piece of the what-to-do puzzle.

As a pragmatist, I still think this is the right motto: both halves, in equal parts. We are at our best as social animals, solution-seekers, agents of a future that is more desirable for more of us than the past has been, when we refuse any limits to the horizons of our thinking, and when we approach the challenge of action as starting close to the scales and loci of our daily lives. Even when we fail each time we try.

The problem I have with the present political moment's variety of localism carries no criticism of local action per se. The problem I see is that this localism is no longer being advanced as a significant next step from thinking globally; this localism is instead being advanced as an alternative to thinking globally. Localist Paul Kingsnorth condemns the environmental movement in The Guardian as being indistinguishable from global capitalism: "Green globalism has become part of the growth machine; a comfortable notion for comfortable people who don't really want much to change." The correction course implied by this stance, for localists,

is some version of lowering our eyes to the soil on which we tread at the same time as we shoulder the yoke to learn how to plough it. I do not deny that such a path of local, biophilic self-reliance has much to teach many of us—rediscovering the focus and peace of localized and lower-technology lifestyles; reconciling ourselves with our place on the earth, our demands on it, and non-human nature's offerings to us; etc. Local action and social ties, when cultivated, can constitute good work. But when this work is seen as an alternative to global thinking, not its necessary synergistic complement, it is pragmatically indistinguishable from the work of gravediggers. That impoverished path of local action will never hold a candle to the possibilities of shooting for the stars, for the majority of the world's population. With good reason, and with deep meaning for the need to keep all of our fellow humans' hopes in mind.

Why? Not in the patronizing way it probably sounds. Not because liberals like me are duplicitous, overeducated, white supremacist, colonialist, paternalist sissies who pretend to care about the hopes of others to the extent that we are pretty sure we can keep our position, our property, our pension plan, and the rest of our packages of privilege. There is plenty of all of those qualities to go around, and that will fuel a lot of arguments to come, as these qualities have done before. My worry about the loss of global thinking is that it is not pragmatic. Pragmatic in the sense that Jane Addams understood (in her 1902 book *Democracy and Social Ethics*) from her own career of thinking globally and acting locally: "We are not content to include all men [sic] in our hopes, but have become conscious that all men are hoping and are part of the same movement of which we are a part."

The gravest error of the localist movement has nothing to do with the pursuit of local action; it has to do with its abandonment of the importance of understanding what all our fellow humans are hoping for. What I object to in the growing localist agenda is that the green movement (or, for that matter, the feminist movement, the decolonialization movement, the movement for Black lives, or any other socially progressive movement that has met with some degree of success in attracting global attention) is some kind of Promethean thief that should be abandoned in self-flagellating penance. Instead, these movements should be seen as containing all the best possibilities for hope in defining the institutions of a more hopeful, less oppressive future, and in seeing their compulsion toward growth as self-flagellating penance.

Instead, these movements should be seen as containing all the best possibilities for hope in defining the institutions of a more hopeful, less oppressive future, and in seeing their compulsion toward growth as endemic to that hope for the human spirit. As compromised as it is, as compromised as we all are, to turn our backs on this global thinking is to abandon hope that it is worth it to keep trying to better understand and better channel our own hubris in pro-social, pro-ecological, pro-flourishing ways.

About the Author

Meg Holden is Director of the Urban Studies Program and Professor in the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Her research examines sustainable development intentions and transitions in cities and communities. She is the author of *Pragmatic Justifications for the Sustainable City: Acting in the Common Place* and co-editor of *(re)Penser la ville du XXIe siècle: 20 ans d'écoquartiers dans le monde*. She holds a PhD in Public and Urban Policy from the New School for Social Research, a MSc Geography from Rutgers University, and a BSc (Hons) Geography from the University of Victoria.

Resist Locally, Renew Globally

Helena Norberg-Hodge

The Promise and Pitfalls of Localism

The fact that the language of localism is being increasingly co-opted by authoritarians around the world is itself a sign of localism's appeal. Left uprooted and adrift by the globalized economy, people are desperate for a sense of connection: to one another, to the living world, to a place and a culture that's familiar to them. Demagogues from Donald Trump to Marie Le Pen to Jair Bolsonaro have capitalized on this longing and turned it towards nationalistic and bigoted ends.

We cannot eliminate the natural human desire for rootedness. Instead, we need to make a very clear distinction between *localism* and *nationalism*.

For most of our time on this planet, we evolved in intergenerational communities, closely bonded to the land, to the plants, to the animals around us. Instead of being dependent on distant, anonymous institutions and businesses, we depended on one another in human-scale structures and institutions. Localism taps into this deep need for community and a sense of place.

Nationalism, on the other hand, destroyed our sense of interdependence with human-scale community and the living environment. Boundaries that ignored natural bioregional and cultural connections were forged by elites to create new artificial identities that promoted centralized power and, in many cases, the war machine.

To restore localized structures, we will need to enact a series of systemic changes to the way the global economy functions. Doing this would reduce or eliminate psychological as well as

economic insecurity, and greatly lessen the appeal of authoritarian leaders, who prey on these insecurities and use them to their advantage.

The faux-localism of "us vs. them," I have found, only emerges after genuinely community-based localism has broken down. It is a pale shadow that can only thrive in the absence of the real thing. I spent decades of my life in Ladakh, India, and witnessed firsthand what happened when the region was opened up to the global economy. The economic base of society veered sharply from self-reliant agriculture to jobs in government and tourism. People were pulled away from decentralized villages into the capital. Buddhists and Muslims who had previously lived in an interdependent economy were now pitted against each other over scarce employment opportunities. At the same time, exposure to the Western consumer culture—mostly through advertising and tourism—led to feelings of cultural and individual inferiority. One of the results of this upheaval was the sudden emergence of violence and tension between Buddhists and Muslims which had never previously existed in Ladakh. Physical dislocation, the breakdown of community, and psychological as well as economic insecurity—all products of economic globalization—bred intolerance. These same factors are now causing similar problems around the world.

Because of this, big-picture activism will be necessary to plant the seeds and tend the shoots of a genuinely liberatory and regenerative localism. We need to raise awareness about the fact that governments are subsidizing and *de*regulating multinationals, while punishing individuals and place-based businesses within the national arena with heavy taxes and onerous regulations. We need to press for changes in taxes, subsidies, and regulations, in order to shift support from large and global businesses towards those small local and regional businesses that will form the bedrock of the economies of the future. At the same time, grassroots activism will be needed to help reconnect people with the communities from which they have become alienated, and to amplify the voices of indigenous peoples and others who have preserved the knowledge of how to live truly place-based lives.

Theories of Transformation

What I am building toward here is a two-pronged theory of change that I often describe with the words "resistance and renewal." It is at once "top-down" and "bottom-up." Resistance to corporate rule at the policy level will need to be coupled with the generation of alternatives from below, to fill the gaps left by the departing old system. This is not about ending global trade or industrial production, but for most of our needs, we will need to shift towards smaller scale and more localized structures: decentralized, community-controlled renewables for energy, revitalized local food systems to feed us, and robust local business environments to employ more people and keep wealth from draining out of our communities.

We can begin this process without national governments on our side. Indeed, it is unlikely that they will jump on this bandwagon before it has already become unstoppable. Instead, we should look to local governments for solidarity. Mayors and local councils are already realizing what higher levels of government have not: that economic and political self-determination go hand in hand. Community rights ordinances, public banks, innovative local food purchasing programs—there are countless models showing how local governments can support local resilience.

The key to integrating these two "prongs" of resistance and renewal lies therefore in building a sense of civic engagement beyond the ballot box. Consumer culture would have us think of ourselves as discrete individuals driven by self-interest, with no allegiance to anything larger than ourselves. But countless initiatives that are rebuilding community connections and deeper relationships to the natural world are already proving effective in reducing depression, anxiety, friction, and violence. And by revitalizing town squares and main streets and reinvigorating the public sphere, local empowerment gives the lie to the message of separation. We must leverage all the tools and passions of local activists, consumers, producers, and local enterprises, to show what is possible when we act in solidarity with our neighbors. We must demonstrate that local economies work, and work well, and then build from there.

Scaling Sideways and Up

In his opener, Brian Tokar raised the question of whether locally based movements can effectively address problems that are global in nature. The one global problem that looms above all others is, of

course, climate change, so it makes sense to ask what the program of economic localization I have just outlined can offer on that front. For one thing, the volume of global trade—which currently accounts for 4% of the world's carbon emissions and is set to rise to 17% by 2050 under current trade rules—would be curbed in an economically localized world. For another, moving from the industrialized, global food system to more localized, diversified food economies would not only allow soils to sequester carbon rather than eroding into the sea, it would also liberate us from the yoke of multinational corporations and massively reduce our dependence on plastic and fossil fuels. The creation of interdependent, local food economies would also mean that biodiversity—both wild and agricultural—would no longer be sacrificed on the altar of corporate profits. A further benefit is that both the scale and the impact of climate-driven migration would be blunted by the emergence of more resilient local economies across the global North and South. Even in the absence of formalized coordination among the world's localization movements, the whole would be—and in many places, already is—greater than the sum of its parts.

There are a number of networks of localist movements already in existence, from La Via Campesina and the Global Ecovillage Network to permaculture and the Transition Network. In these alliances, channels of cross-initiative communication are being opened up, not just for the purpose of information-sharing, but also for direct collaboration—and, in some cases, for the hashing-out of differences of opinion regarding future steps. We will have to bear in mind the lessons learned through the processes of engagement within these networks if we wish to scale the localization movement "sideways and up" in any coordinated fashion—for example, to tackle the climate crisis or trade policy at the level of international institutions.

In the meantime, the seeds of our local future continue to be planted every day. My organization, Local Futures, has collected some of the most inspiring and successful examples in our Planet Local library. As the fault lines in the global economy continue to grow, and the desire for genuine human connection becomes ever more keenly felt, these existing initiatives will provide direction as well as inspiration, and stand as a compelling alternative to the faux-localist path of violence, fear, and hate.

About the Author

Helena Norberg-Hodge is a linguist, author, filmmaker, and pioneer of the new economy movement. She is the founder and director of Local Futures and the convenor of World Localization Day and the Planet Local Summit. She is author of *Ancient Futures* and *Local is Our Future* and producer of *Planet Local* and the award-winning documentary *The Economics of Happiness*. She is the founder of the International Alliance for Localisation and a co-founder of both the International Forum on Globalization and the Global Ecovillage Network. She is a recipient of the Alternative Nobel prize, the Arthur Morgan Award, and the Goi Peace Prize.

Think Cosmically, Act Globally

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 economistic 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).

The Global Shapes the Local

Chella Rajan

Although thinking in global terms and thinking in proximate terms constitute two distinct conceptual frames, they can be related to one another. Indeed, doing so is essential to a Great Transition.

The local appears as the visible, familiar, and infinitely moldable set of experiences in one's everyday life, while the planetary (and, even more so, the global) seems abstract and symbolic, which can only be experienced through various representations of the pale blue dot. But if we were able to recognize, more clearly than we can now, the overlapping networks of connection between local actors and institutions and planetary-scale processes, we could fill out the continuities more constructively.

Let me try to illustrate with the help of an example from South India. My colleagues and I at the Periurban Initiative work with youth in a hamlet that is multiply "bypassed" by a highway, gated industrial and residential communities, and surrounding water bodies and cultural sites. It is difficult to get more "local" than Katchipattu (population: 5,000), whose largely unemployed or underemployed youth are mostly twiddling their thumbs on cell phones. Their parents used to work as tenant or landless farmers, weavers and other craft populations. Most are Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") and best described as being members of the precariat.

Now, with a major highway blocking natural drainage from the nearby lake, increased weather variability, the growing sense among erstwhile farmers that their children might benefit from a technical education, and a spurt of investment in the form of Special Economic Zones, an entirely new assemblage of socio-technical elements is in the making.

Indeed, the familiar twin set of planetary processes—globalization and climate change—have objectively diminished the life chances of Katchipattu residents, only a few of whom seem to recognize linkages between their present predicament and large-scale forces. Most young people are plagued by what Lauren Berlant has evocatively described as "cruel optimism," an unwarranted feeling of collective well-being, an excitement about "change that's gonna come" that has no bearing on actual circumstances.[1] The young men of Katchipattu typically start their day drinking, doing a few drugs, and sharing videos of their friends' music, while eternally holding out the hope for bit roles in Kollywood (referring to the multi-billion-dollar Kodambakkam movie industry in Chennai).

What's so different from hundreds of millions of young people elsewhere in the world in bleak inner cities or culturally barren suburbs? Not much, except that this is a local instantiation of a pattern whose social and economic causes have been well-studied. To deny the value of the conceptual insights drawn from anthropologists in Chicago, London, and Jakarta to interpret what is happening in Katchipattu would be strange. But Katchipattu's geographically and culturally distinctive location must also not be railroaded over.

Similarly, in order to achieve any type of meaningful change in Katchipattu, one must investigate expanding networks of power from the local to the global to understand what forces led to these circumstances and what points of intervention exist at all levels. Elite networks and their interlocking connections in Chennai, Dubai, Singapore, and Stuttgart (for a start) are implicated in determining the conditions in Katchipattu, but an excessive focus on the local might not reveal that unless one engages in a forensic exercise of placing people-environment interactions in progressively wider contexts.[2]

Intervention too seems to need the conjoined actions at local and larger scales, in order to engage (fractally) with local instantiations of transnational network flows and material forces. For the youth of Katchipattu themselves, would getting them to watch the HBO series *The Wire* give them some new insights into the commonness of their experience in other global localities? What type of planetary consciousness might that engender? Are there transformational possibilities away from cruel optimism and, if so, what would these entail in culturally specific ways? And might these, in turn, generate lessons elsewhere, if "successful"?

Endnotes

1. Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

2. Andrew P. Vayda, "Progressive Contextualization: Methods for Research in Human Ecology," *Human Ecology* 11, no. 3 (1983): 265–281.

About the Author

Chella Rajan is Professor and Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M). He is also Coordinator of the Indo-German Centre for Sustainability and an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute. He has an extensive twenty-year research background in transportation, energy systems, and the institutional and political context of environmental policymaking. He is broadly concerned with the interactions among social, political, technological and environmental factors relating to sustainable development. His research has included energy and environmental scenario analyses, studies on the politics of power sector reform in developing countries, and analysis of institutional reform measures to reduce corruption.

Human Rights from the Ground Up

Jackie Smith

The Promise and Pitfalls of Localism

If we look at some of the earliest critiques of the global capitalist system, they call for a return to more small-scale, locally grounded economies and ways of life. This is true for indigenous peoples' centuries of struggle against dispossession and erasure, and it appears in various forms in many other movements throughout history. I think history suggests a collective, movement-generated knowledge that sees a connection to place as a radical response to the oppressions that come from the global extractive economy and its political apparatus.

Bottom-up action and local identities are not only viable as foundations for a global movement, but they are also essential if we are to mobilize the collective energies and creativity needed to address today's existential crises. Unless we find a way to define a social project that gives more people a sense of meaning and a real stake in supporting the radical changes in lifestyles and thinking that are needed to avert catastrophe, we're all doomed.

Although we live in a global era, we all must live in a place. We must be part of a social and ecological community that supports our livelihood. Globalization has uprooted us from our places, creating a world of migrants and uprooted communities. With capitalism's expansion, many living beings have been evicted from the homes of human ancestors and from our ecological home. Work to cultivate a sense of and a commitment to place, and to build what George Monbiot calls a "politics of belonging," can help us navigate out of the dangerous situation in which we find ourselves.

Theories of Transformation

To achieve the goal expressed by the Zapatistas of "one world where many worlds fit," we need to build unity around a shared vision or story about how our world could be organized. I think that story is present in our movements' histories and especially in their expressions of ideas of human rights and democracy. What I mean by these terms, however, is not the conventional understandings of their manifestations in liberal institutions and discourse. Rather, it is expressed through the language of people's movements throughout history, and what grassroots human rights organizers are calling "people-centered human rights."

Although many radicals eschew human rights language, associating it with liberal and imperialist traditions, what I have found in my movement work is that such language is embraced by and has resonance with frontline communities who are most harmed by capitalism. I have therefore decided to engage in activism that uses human rights as a tool for local organizing. I have found that it is useful for helping build conversations across differences and generating shared ideas and actions for the kind of communities we need for our survival. Moreover, because human rights are global—both in their formal articulation in international law and in their focus on people as human beings rather than as holders of particular national identities—the human rights framework helps get local residents thinking about their connections with people outside their own country and seeing possibilities for solidarity. It also expands political imaginations to encompass global alliance structures and institutions as well as national ones.

What is particularly useful about the people-centered human rights framework is that it enables conversations among groups that have become dangerously polarized, as well as across movements that have tended to work in single-issue silos. Based on the ancient "golden rule," we can start from a place that recognizes that all of us seek to be treated with dignity and respect, and if we want that, we have to treat others that way. The global human rights movement provides networks for solidarity-building that can foster cross-cultural empathy and create a culture that prioritizes our humanity over differences such as race, class, nationality, gender, etc.

A concept that has emerged from my work in movements is that of "political imagination." As I

work to engage local activists around human rights claims, I am frustrated by how the prevailing system entraps us by limiting our thinking about what it means to do politics. Even radical activists tend to become preoccupied with elections (local and national) and mainstream policy debates and processes, failing to see how these structures channel our political energies in a direction that can only lead to a very narrow set of possible outcomes—none of which can help stem our society's ecological collapse or polarization and violence. We need to create spaces where new options become visible and viable. Inviting people to think about what our cities and towns would look like if they were truly organized in ways that prioritized human rights over material wealth opens up paths to new ways of thinking about alternatives to capitalism. Without a different collective vision of where we want our communities to go, and a commitment of people to work together to lead the way towards that vision, we cannot elect any candidate who can take us there.

Scaling Sideways and Up

The initiative to which I have dedicated my energies is the growing global "human rights cities" movement. This movement is a response that has been building from cities around the world to address the growing urgency for protections of people's basic needs such as housing, water, energy, and other rights. The "right to the city" has been a rallying cry for people in all parts of the world, and many activists are coming together around the strategy of building "human rights cities." The exact means for pursuing this varies across locales, but it starts with grassroots leaders organizing popular pressure from an intersectional collection of activists and organizations demanding that city leaders prioritize human rights in public policy. Cities might, for instance, adopt human rights treaties that national governments have failed to ratify (such as US "Cities for CEDAW," i.e., the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) or pass local legislation that subjects policies to human rights assessments and supports human rights education. A major function of human rights city organizing is to promote human rights consciousness in local settings and to build diverse coalitions of community activists, residents, and public officials committed to advancing policies and practices that support human rights.

In a recent article, I document some of the work being done by Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance, which I believe can be (if scaled up beyond the now rather small group of activists upon whom the project now depends) a powerful antidote to the prevailing political tendencies. What is hopeful about this project is that it is gaining traction. In 2015, we hosted a small gathering of US human rights city leaders. Our initiative led the American Friends Service Committee to host a follow-up meeting in Washington, DC, the following year, which gave birth to the US Human Rights Cities Alliance, on whose steering committee I now serve. Although we have few resources, we have hosted several other human rights city gatherings around the United States to share and develop movement strategies and organizing templates.

Knowing that there is international attention on local rights conditions may not move national governments to act, but mayors and other community leaders are more accountable to the people whose lives their decisions impact, and they can significantly impact national policies. By reminding image-sensitive local leaders that "the world is watching," such initiatives can help keep human rights on local agendas and shift discourses in ways that prioritize human rights over the prevailing, uncritical acceptance of market logics.

The goal of the human rights cities movement is to support local work that builds a bottom-up movement for a world where human rights are truly universal and indivisible. This movement is locally grounded, but consciously translocal and global in orientation. Activists seek ideas and support from folks in other cities, and our national network draws a great deal of knowledge and energy from work with our counterparts outside the United States. A key strategy that orients actions is to build local human rights constituencies throughout the country—people who know their rights and are organized to defend them. While national governments ratify treaties and participate in UN processes, it is ultimately local officials who make and enforce decisions that relate most directly to international human rights laws and standards. Yet, many local officials are uninformed about international law. The human rights movement has learned through long years of struggle that it is up to organized communities, then, to become our own "human rights enforcers."

In the words of World Social Forum (and other) activists, "another world is possible," and "we are the ones we've been waiting for"!

About the Author

Jackie Smith is a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and the editor of the Journal of World Systems Research. Her research addresses the relationships between economic globalization, social conflicts, and popular struggles. She is involved locally with Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance and coordinates the Pitt Human Rights Initiative, which engages in educational and research activities aimed at promoting and defending human rights locally and beyond. Her books include *Social Movements in the World System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation* (with Dawn Wiest); *Social Movements for Global Democracy*; *Coalitions across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order* (with Joe Bandy, ed.); and the *Handbook of World Social Forum Activism* (with Scott Byrd, Ellen Reese and Elizabeth Smythe, eds.).

What We Can Learn from the Labor Movement

Aaron Vansintjan

I greatly enjoyed Brian Tokar's reflections on the potentials, and pitfalls, of localism. He is right to point out that place-based activism has seen an upsurge, but also to acknowledge that localism has a dark side, as seen in the call for "local control" by reactionary movements. Further, localism is often criticized for being unable to engage with issues which require action at national and multi-lateral levels, such as nationalism, free trade agreements, or climate change. To this concern, Tokar offers the philosophy and political theory of social ecology, which can help us address these inherent limits of localism. I agree with the fundamental need for democratic and place-based communities to confederate and scale up their action to the "glocal" level. I also agree that a commitment to confederating and establishing common principles can counter the rise of racist, nationalist localism.

I would like to reflect briefly on three points, which I hope add to Tokar's argument. First, all meaningful action is local. When we talk about local vs. global action, we often end up stuck in dualisms. Advocates of local action are often met with complaints that their actions fail to scale up and address the "big problem": a global, flexible, and mobile capitalist system. This argument was succinctly framed by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams in their book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, in which they called the recent tendency of progressives to limit themselves to localism "folk politics." The implication is that we can only focus on the big things like the flow of capital, national politics, or taking control over the means of production on a larger scale, if we want to affect change.

Indeed, as Tokar underscores, localism fails without "scaling up" through, for example, multi-level and multi-system collaboration, resource-sharing, and confederation. In addition, I would ask us

to look back at meaningful change (revolutions, if you will) from the past. Most of what gives us the slightest comfort under capitalism—limits to the work-week, a minimum wage, health care, basic protections from employers and landlords, child support, and free public school—has been won by labor movements. The principle of labor organizing is simple: employees talk about their problems together and then make demands from their employer. When the employer (inevitably) refuses, they stop working. The union supports workers with resources and legal aid. To get them to work again, the employer is forced to agree to their demands. Seeing the benefits of this strategy, more workers join the union, and unions develop the power to make demands at higher and higher levels—eventually forcing concessions from government under threat of general strike.

The working class's ability to get together locally, and to collectively do politics, has shaped history, exacting entitlements and rights from capital that have made our lives tolerable. This is local action scaled up to the global. Capitalism might operate globally, but all meaningful action against it is by people who live and work in a place. Therefore, arguing that place-based action ultimately cannot challenge capitalism fails to understand that it, in fact, is the very beginning and basic building block of wider, scaled-up resistance.

Second, place-based and municipalist movements must make clear demands that block capital. In my experience, municipalist movements have a tendency to depoliticize themselves in an effort to appear more accessible. Democracy, local control, citizen engagement—what's not to like? The truth is that as soon as local control is strengthened, investors and industries have all the power to leave and do business elsewhere. Municipal governments—many of those Tokar cites for developing admirable climate action plans and solidarity policies—bend over backwards to accommodate our new tech overlords, companies like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft.

Drawing again on the example of the labor movement, demands were won from capitalists and politicians, not by asking nicely, but by withdrawing their only tool—their labor—and thus taking away the capitalists' ability to make a profit. In general, the power of the elite cannot be confronted by timidly asking or jumping to compromises. It can only be confronted by hampering the source of their power in the first place: the ability to make a profit. Like past movements, municipalist movements must take a combative stance that withdraws capital's

ability to make a profit. Place-based movements like Transition Towns, ecovillages, and urbanist-style "green development" have largely failed to understand the role of conflict and uneven power relations in shaping local politics, and the need to enter into a combative relationship with capital and its allied political leaders. Municipalist movements must unflinchingly stand up against capital.

I have cited the labor movement as an important predecessor, yet it is now at a historic low point (though we are now seeing some revitalization, especially in the United States). Labor in the West has diminished capacity to make and win significant demands, mainly because of the decimation of industrialized labor due to successive free trade agreements, and the fragmentation of the workplace into smaller units with the shift to the service economy. Sectors that are seeing a revitalized labor movement tend to have large shared employers, e.g., government employees like teachers, postal workers, and nurses, or those working in the logistics industry, e.g., truck drivers, port workers, and Amazon workers.

This leads me to my third point, which is that municipalist movements are in a perfect position to assume the mantle of the workers' movements as the agents of history, while building alliances with them. With most capital today invested in real estate and cities, blocking developments, demanding investments in amenities, and refusing to accept the privatization of public space can be key strategies for our new democratic, municipalist movements. We can, and should, force capitalists to the bargaining table, and the best way to do so is to organize locally to take control of local governments, or, barring that, force them to resist developers and investors.

My third point is more speculative. This course of action will inevitably bring about a series of crises and shocks to the capitalist system, with consequent backlash. As local movements gather, confederate, and challenge the power of capital and the state at different levels, there will be crackdowns, violence, embargos, and refusal to provide aid. (Witness Donald Trump's threats to withdraw federal aid to "solidarity cities" and cities increasingly affected by climate change.) In preparation for this, what relationships of care, alliances between movements, networks of mutual aid, and strategies of resistance can we start developing now? This will be, I believe, an important part of municipalist action to come.

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The Global Is Never Far Away

Michelle Williams

While the local is where many alternatives are created and lived, the local exists in a complex and varied relation to the national and global. For one, what happens at the local is often circumscribed by national and global systems. A federal system like the US where states and municipalities have a great deal of power, for instance, is a very different context than a less federal system like South Africa where the national government determines legislation and policy.

In general, economic policies in the Global South are heavily determined by powerful forces in the Global North (both by states and corporations), often with dire consequences for local struggles that very often must take on both national and global forces. The power of imperial capitalism, especially over the Global South, is clearly visible in state policy, action, and development. In South Africa, mining-affected communities (especially women) have been struggling against transnational corporations in bitter battles that see traditional leaders selling communal land to mining corporations with state consent. Thus, for local activism, the global and the interests of transnational elites are never far away. Likewise, the search for alternative futures must recognize unequal power relations that have deep histories in imperial capitalism.

Transformative politics must be rooted in local initiatives that connect up into networks of solidarity. We must keep continually searching, revising, experimenting, and rethinking our theories of transformation. In South Africa, the progressive Constitution and the moral and political mandate for transformation have at least provided the space for local struggles to envision life beyond capitalism.

But what does this mean? Among many local struggles, we find common principles of equality, social, economic and environmental justice, democratic decision-making, and collective ownership. Many local initiatives are both defensive and generative, trying to find new ways in the interstitial spaces of the dominant system to fight against injustices. My work on solidarity economies, and especially worker cooperatives, has made me realize the importance of building connections beyond the local and the national, regional, and global. At the same time, I have come to appreciate the importance of fighting with, against, and beyond the national state. What happens locally will be critical for forging a transition to a sustainable, just world.

About the Author

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Author's Response

Response to Comments

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 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.