

Translocal Activism: Making “the Impossible” Possible

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[A recent essay by Richard Falk](#) argues that the key to building global solidarity lies in work to foster imagination. This idea is evident in much of the work happening in social movements today. The social hierarchies we’ve inherited and the divisions they create are at the core of global capitalism, and they are ingrained in our very understandings of our identities, cultural histories and institutions. We need a sociological imagination to understand how powerful groups have created and manipulated social divisions so that we can invent pathways towards a more livable, cohesive world. In other words, we need *political and legal imagination* aimed at transforming the basic institutions of our societies, including, e.g., schools, media, legal systems, and government. The often overlooked struggles of people around the world provide important knowledge of the “[politics of impossibility](#)” needed to build the world we need.

A promising path to global solidarity known as “translocalism” characterizes many of today’s struggles for rights and democracy. Translocalism refers to relationships across locales that transcend conventional political constraints and enable new social and ecological relationships, social identities, and bases of authority. It focuses on and celebrates local identities, shifting people’s attention from global to local scales, where human and ecological relationships are more visible and valued. Through collective struggle, people learn to work together to imagine new ways of living together and advancing shared needs (see [Banerjee 2011](#)).

Translocal connections that link particular places within global social webs thus enable people to re-imagine citizenship and other dimensions of identity. “[Placemaking](#)” practices nurture local identities and allegiances to ecosystems and communities. They challenge fundamentally the globalization project’s ongoing, forced displacement of people and non-human species and enable people re-imagine and defend their relationships to local communities and the land.

Social movement projects such as [municipalism](#), [right to the city](#) movements, and [transition towns](#) all demonstrate models for organizing communities in ways that help people re-imagine local identities and relationships and re-define their role in governing their communities. They build community control over economic and social practices that most directly impact people’s livelihoods, and in doing so help expand the spaces of political life. By centering place and relationships within *and beyond* particular communities, they help build more inclusive, intersectional politics and foster social cohesion, countering today’s dangerously polarized politics of resentment and exclusion.

Translocal practices offer an alternative paradigm—or “social operating system”—from that of globalized capitalism, one that imagines elements of a solidarity-supporting system. This paradigm prioritizes human rights and care over economic growth, interdependent over extractive relationships with the planet, cooperation over competition, knowledge ecologies over hegemonic Western science, long- over short-term, communities over individualism, and local

over global scales ([See chart](#) below). Using various strategies and organizational forms, they encourage the re-imagining and *decolonization* of thinking as well as institutions and practices as a prerequisite for global solidarity.

Contested Social Operating Systems

<i>Primary emphasis:</i>	Capitalism	People-centered human rights
Policy orientation	Economic growth	People’s well-being/ <i>buen vivir</i>
Logics	Growth, “productivity”; accumulation & extraction	Care, social-ecological sustainability
Nature-Society Relations	Anthropocentric/ human autonomy	Interdependence/ eco-systemic
Social relations	Hierarchical, competitive	Interdependent, cooperative
Knowledge base	Technical, expert (Western)	Diverse & dialogic
Scale	Global	Local & translocal
Agency	Individuals	Communities
Time frame	Short term	Long-term

[Social movements have long promoted](#) alternative ways of organizing global social relations, enacting what I’ve called a “[human rights globalization](#)” project. Collecting observations about how people in diverse places around the world have responded to the disruptions and violence of capitalist globalization, we see remarkable similarities in the discourses and character of struggles. A desire for global and local societies that enable community control of land and supportive ecosystems, dignified and sustainable livelihoods, and social relations based on care and reciprocity are among key features of this emergent global project. Movements are also generating and popularizing transformative, intersectional identities based in non-hierarchical and ecologically grounded social relations. Drawing from this long history, I highlight a few contemporary examples.

Today’s struggles for collective, human rights of indigenous peoples, peasants, women, and people of African descent are all significant in that they articulate transversal identities that help unite people beyond nation states while engaging them in formal inter-state political processes. The Permanent Forum of Indigenous Peoples and the process advancing a similar [forum for People of African Descent](#), UN Women, and [UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants](#), have all created global spaces where identities that transcend and challenge existing state power are deepening and impacting both global and local spaces. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights —established in 1993 after decades of movement pressure—has strengthened institutional arrangements that bring people together across national borders and hold even powerful governments more accountable to global human rights standards. Ongoing engagement of social movements with this process has, in turn, generated new spaces for re-imagining identities and promoting global solidarity.

Efforts to “bring human rights home” and make international law more meaningful for people’s lives has encouraged the translocalization of human rights struggles, generating projects that expand political and legal imaginations and challenge prevailing power structures. For instance, the World Conference Against Racism helped forge global movement unity and generate more cohesive global pressure on governments to tackle structural racism and its effects. Translocal movement pressure led to a recent [seminal UN report on systemic racism](#) that was remarkably blunt in its condemnations of institutionalized racism and called for all governments to accelerate progress towards “transformative” and “comprehensive” changes, including reparations. Such work helps hold violators of rights—including institutions and systems—accountable and builds power and agency for marginalized local groups and global unity against right-wing and white supremacist movements.

Other examples of legal imagination include [Stop Ecocide’s](#) campaign supporting the legal rights of nature by [making ecocide a crime](#). The [Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) models other initiatives to mobilize municipalities to implement global treaties, including the [Cities for CEDAW](#) campaign and UNICEF’s [Child Friendly Cities](#) initiative. Communities recognize that they don’t need to wait for political leadership from national levels to align their communities with the global human rights community. [People’s tribunals](#) and efforts to create [councils on future generations in local and national governments](#) can highlight the urgency of today’s social and ecological crises and promote more imagination in transformative problem-solving.

Complementing these efforts at the local level are social movement initiatives aimed at rolling back corporate power and supporting the democratization of national and local political institutions. This work is essential to making necessary changes possible. Neoliberal globalization and corporate growth has done great damage to our democracies, and local initiatives calling for greater transparency and public engagement in local policies from budgeting to policing to housing and economic development are essential for both ensuring people’s basic needs, [addressing climate change](#), and preventing the further escalation of violence and polarization. Initiatives to [advance a global treaty on corporations and human rights](#), promote regulation and equity in global media and communications systems, and [promote other policies and institutions that rein in corporate power](#) are all critical elements of work to build the world we need.

In sum, social movements working across locales are generating blueprints for a better world. What is needed is more people working to re-imagine their own possible supportive roles improving, adapting and advancing these. By converging translocally around new social, political, and legal imaginaries, global solidarity is possible!

Jackie Smith is a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and author of numerous books and articles on social movements and globalization, including “[Making Other Worlds Possible: The Battle in Seattle in World-Historical Context](#)” and “[Challenging Corporate Power: Human Rights Globalization from Above and Below](#).” She is co-coordinator of Pittsburgh’s Human Rights City Alliance.