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From: Great Transition Network <gttnetwork@greattransition.org>
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To: Great Transition Network
Subject: Experiments in Movement Unity: What's Next? (GTN Discussions)

From Evelin Lindner

[Moderator's Note: Thank you to everyone who has commented! The open discussion period is now closed. I will be spacing out final comments. -- JC]

First, I thank Paul Raskin and Jonathan Cohn for their seminal work. I benefited highly from reading all the comments that came in during the past two months.

In my contribution, I want to avoid duplicating what others have written and rather go deeper into two points. First, activists may need to better understand *deferred elimination*. Second, they may also need to better understand the influence of humiliation. Nurturing dignifying relationships with people one wishes to convince is a precondition for the acceptance of new ideas, because even the best new ideas will be rejected if they humiliate. Activists themselves may fall for the same problem, namely, when they reject ideas that are worth embracing.

The need to learn about *deferred elimination*

In times of crisis, communities tend to become ever more polarized, as two possible pathways into the future grow ever more irreconcilable — “more of the same” versus “less of the same.” A painful gap opens between “let us optimize business as usual” and “let us do a complete turnaround, exit from business as usual, and embark on something entirely new.”

All around the world, I meet thinkers and activists who opt for a complete turnaround (I am one of them), while others do not, and a third group attempts to form bridges (I am one of them, too).

My observation is that some of those who opt for “let us optimize business as usual” are caught in what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *deferred elimination*. [1] In a nutshell, they confuse opportunities for entry with opportunities for success. Bourdieu identified this dynamic for the educational system, however, in my view, it can be observed also in a much wider range of situations. It speaks to what Ashish Kothari and Shrishtee Bajpai wrote in their introductory essay, namely, the need to avoid being captured by false hopes and promises within existing structures.

Whoever wants to silence critical voices has several options: critical voices may be brutally silenced by being imprisoned or even killed, or false dichotomies may be established, such as, for instance, the “environment versus jobs” dichotomy. More sophisticated strategies eliminate critics with their own consent, and this is what Bourdieu describes. It is the strategy of inviting people to exhaust themselves for promises that are ultimately empty. Idealists all around the world fall into that “trap” and exhaust themselves in “good works” that in the end are irrelevant for the larger context. When they become aware that even their most dedicated efforts cannot keep the larger power structures from moving in the wrong direction, they may

even blame themselves. They are then ready for depression or cynicism, or for being captured by authoritarian imaginings or conspiracy narratives. Indeed, having lived on all continents for the past decades, I have met countless formerly idealistic activists who once thought they could make a difference only to end up demoralized.

To see through the strategy of deferred elimination takes time and requires experience. I have learned from these experiences to direct my efforts toward global work. My aim is to help create a world where valuable local projects no longer get crushed as soon as they come too close to the red lines of the larger power structures.

The need to learn about the *dynamics of humiliation*

During the past decades, I have observed that many activists overestimate the power of arguments and underestimate the role of relationships, both in their immediate local social environment and globally. This includes a lack of insight into the destructive power of the dynamics of humiliation. In short, many fail to grasp that even the best argument will be rejected if the recipients of the message feel humiliated by it.

I observe several dynamics of humiliation of the past blocking important future-oriented insights and action. Many “regressives” maintain cycles of humiliation between two “systems,” namely — to simplify, “capitalism versus socialism” — while the colonial past also hinders progressives. The masculinist mindset and Western individualism hinder all.

As to the first case, rivals such as Russia and the United States could have become friends after the Cold War. Yet, this did not happen. One side perceived itself as triumphant and the other side now strikes back, setting in motion a new hot spiral of mutual humiliation. In such a context, suggestions for large-scale systemic change that may transcend this spiral become even more suspect than before, on all sides. Those who perceive themselves as the “victors,” for instance, suspect such suggestions of trying to humiliate the victors by denying and undermining their victory. Instead of peace, nuclear extermination looms.

What is overlooked by most regressives and some progressives alike, is that any focus on “combat” or “victory” is outdated and misplaced in an interconnected world where arguments can no longer be enforced by the sword. Before any “hard fact” can convince, those who bring the message must do the “soft” work of nurturing dignifying relationships with whoever they wish to reach with their message.

As to the colonial past, I observe some progressives drawing from it the conclusion that “power is bad because it is humiliating.” Philosopher Michel Foucault held anti-power positions, at least initially, believing that “no power” is better than “bad power.” Philosopher Howard Richards faults post-modernist critics like Foucault for leaving us with a cruel choice: either no meta-narrative or a toxic meta-narrative. Indeed, in her contribution to this Forum, Francine Mestrum observed that universalism is now said to be “abstract,” “as if it were not a condition to preserve diversity.”

Underlying the problem with power is the notion of freedom. “Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep,” philosopher Isaiah Berlin brought it to the point. [2] “New green liberalism” is therefore not enough. Many indigenous traditions — taboo rules, for instance, that could help prevent ecocide and sociocide — represent exercises in “good” power that avoid humiliating oppression.

I advocate *interconnected individuality* instead of the disconnected individualism that has emerged in the West and that is being embraced by regressives and progressives alike. Anthropologist Alan Page Fiske calls

my way of organising communal life *communal sharing*. Every aspect of life on Earth is currently being pushed into the opposite direction, into the least comprehensive way of being, namely, what Fiske calls *market pricing*, thus reducing the fullness of the *quality* of life on this planet into mere quantity calculations. The healthy and peaceful Indigenous cycle of *cooperative companionship* that characterizes many indigenous cultural traditions, is turned into *competitive detachment*, as indigenous psychologist Darcia Narváez would say.

Since 2001, I have been nurturing a global network of evolutionary leaders, dedicating my life to humanizing globalization through equal dignity for all in freedom and solidarity so that dignified life can flourish on this planet in the future. I have coined the term *dignism (dignity-ism)* to describe a decent global village “where every new-born finds space and is nurtured to unfold their highest and best, embedded in a social context of loving appreciation and connection, where the carrying capacity of the planet guides the ways in which everyone’s basic needs are met....Dignism means loving care for the common good of all of humanity as co-inhabitants of one single finite habitat.” [3]

Evelin Lindner

[1] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, trans. Richard Nice. 2nd edition (London: Sage, 1990); French original *La reproduction: Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1970).

[2] Isaiah Berlin, “Freedom for the Wolves,” *Four essays on liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[3] Evelin Lindner, *From humiliation to dignity: For a future of global solidarity* (Lake Oswego, OR: World Dignity University Press, 2023).

August 20, 2023

Steps towards common demands and proposals

Francine Mestrum, World Social Assembly of Struggles and Resistances of the WSF

In this second contribution, the objective is to focus on “the state of play” and on the way we are coalescing—or not—towards a global citizens movement. Can GTI be a catalyst?

The Global Citizens movement is meant to be “an ecology of movements,” a broad umbrella of inclusive solidarity and common purpose, a hypothesized systemic change agent for a great transition.

These starting points take me back to the 1980s, when many debates were taking place already on the possible cooperation between parties and movements of the left. There was a lot more optimism then than there is now. Unfortunately, almost half a century later, we have to admit our failure and understand that the optimism is fading away as well.

I would like to mention six points of explanation in order to learn the lessons and better prepare for the future.

First, this is a highly political topic, clearly positioned at the left side of the political spectrum. Avoiding the choice between left and right will not bring us any closer to sustainable solutions, since our common objective, at least I hope, is an emancipatory policy of justice, equality, and solidarity. That is a counter-hegemonic exercise. Such an agenda can never be promoted by right-wing forces that do not want people to take their future into their own hands. Not being explicit about this political dimension implies the risk of multiple misunderstandings.

Secondly, today, we are no longer talking about political parties, but of movements, which makes the exercise easier but also trickier. In the World Social Forum, political parties were banned, and only individual members talking in their personal capacity were welcome. This, of course, ignored the fact that most parties have their own movements, and these were very present in the Forum and its International Council. The consequence was discussions and conflicts at an ideological level very akin to electoral debates. In the future, competitive debates should be avoided at all costs.

Thirdly, trying to work with others and searching for common concerns is only possible if you know each other well, if you know the strong and weak fundamentals, if you know on what points compromises on common action are possible or not. It demands serious self-reflection and patience to listen and try to understand others.

Fourthly, for most parties and movements there is one obstacle that makes any approximation more difficult: when “the goal is the movement.” In other words, if, more than the pursuit of the social objectives of any party or movement, the organisation itself has to be strengthened, as a priority. It means that cooperation with others can only be accepted if this helps to give the own movement a boost. Hence, many movements do work together with others with the silent aim of dominating the cooperation itself. If this happens from different parts, it is clear the cooperation will never succeed.

Fifthly, linked to the previous points, one has to be aware that for many progressive and left-wing people and movements, the political identity coincides with the personal identity, making it more difficult to compromise or change. This policy of honesty and loyalty to your cause is too often an impediment for making coalitions and forging cooperation tactics. Giving in on one single point of your movement’s identity is then like betraying yourself.

Sixthly, too many movements also have thematic blinders. If they are working on, say pensions or disabled people, they will have no mandate to discuss anything else. Even just asking an agreement to sign a text on, say, debt cancellation, will be impossible.

Finally, a separate point that makes it all more difficult today is the decline of some basic values on which we were able to join in the past. Take universalism, which is now said to be “abstract” as if it were not a condition to preserve diversity; or “development” as if not all people aspire to have decent and sustainable livelihoods. Or take democracy, in whatever form, as if right-wing policies or military dictatorships were able to take care of people’s needs. Other examples are the role of the State, “western” human rights, the rejection of “modernity,” etc. Surely, in this chapter, the question of definitions is crucial, since very often one uses the same words to indicate different realities. In many cases, the distance from words to things, from discourse to practice is too large to bridge. In other cases, there are real and serious differences of opinion.

These six plus one points may look like very serious impediments to work towards more unity. In fact, the first thing to define very carefully is the objective itself: what kind of “unity” do we want? Is it real ideological

unity or just variable and temporary platforms for making strong and common demands and proposals?

To this question has to be added another difficult one. Do we just want a dialogue between our movements in order to get to know each other and confirm our own identities or do we also want to learn from and reciprocally influence each other? In other words, do we believe in universal values or not?

Before starting any exercise of approximation, it can be useful for all movements to undertake a self-reflection on all these questions in order to assess the possibility of joining a common platform.

With the World Social Assembly of Struggles and Resistances we created in the global WSF process, we aim to take positions on important political events, to organise meetings with global intellectuals and movements, to reflect on strategies, to organise actions, and to bring together movements working on different but interconnected topics.

This implies an open attitude to start and search for common concerns, a long-term exercise for which the rules have to be clearly spelled out. It cannot be about doing away with differences or identities, on the contrary. Nor can it be about limiting the action radius of movements. It should be about finding out which concerns a number of movements share, in spite of their diversity.

GTI could be of great help in contributing to this knowledge process, in different ways. It could help in mapping our movements and trying to find out what we share and do not share, what our margins for action are. This can be done in direct contacts or with questionnaires focused on possible topics for possible common actions. Our World Social Assembly would be very happy to join a core of movements to undertake this effort.

This may look very ambitious and utopian, but giving up on building “another world” should not be an option.

August 10, 2023

GTN Colleagues:

Thanks to all who contributed to the first half of this discussion with descriptions of real-world “experiments in movement unity.” I write now to introduce the second half, an open exchange on the current condition of the global movement and directions for its future. I encourage responses to two questions.

First, what is your broad assessment of the state-of-play of the movement? Starting with the [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#), we’ve heard from an impressive array of organizing efforts for systemic change. Taken collectively, do these and [others](#) point plausibly toward the coalescence of a global citizens movement (GCM)?* Is something essential missing from the movement landscape? What is it?

Second, specifically, how might GTI itself evolve to better serve as a catalyst for a GCM? Launched in 2003, GTI has focused for two decades on building the theoretical and analytical foundations for a GT. The time has come for embarking on a new phase that shifts emphasis from the realm of ideas to the realm of action. Please share your initial thoughts on possible programmatic directions for GTI in 2024 and beyond. What new “experiment in movement unity” should we run?

Comments are welcome through **September 15**. Please aim for concision within the 1,200 word cap.

Over to you,
Paul

* In GTI's nomenclature, the GCM—a polycentric ecology of movements, organizations, and associations within a broad umbrella of inclusive solidarity and common purpose—is the hypothesized systemic change agent for a Great Transition.

To submit a comment for this GTN discussion, click reply or send it to jcohn@tellus.org. *Expect a delay between the submission and posting.*

You can review the discussion [here](#), where you can also submit your comment by replying to any previously posted comment.