

Experiments in Movement Unity

Reflections by Evelin Lindner

in contribution to the Great Transition Network (GTN) discussion of August 2023

in response to the opening essay by Ashish Kothari and Shrishtee Bajpai

Global tapestry of alternatives: Weaving transformative connections

<https://greattransition.org/images/Global-Tapestry-Kothari-Bajpai.pdf>

First, I thank Paul Raskin and Jonathan Cohn for their seminal work. I benefitted 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, so is my proposition, 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. This is also part of the explanation of why “the world became rich in plans for sustainability action ... but poor in meaningful action,” as Paul Raskin has reported.²

The United Nations are caught in the same trap. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals comprise Goal 8, which has the potential to undermine all other goals. As Steven Klees noted in his contribution, “The SDGs explicitly assume that what is needed is increased GDP growth and an increased role of business, markets, and private actors. That, of course, is exactly wrong. The UN is being taken over by private corporations under the guise of multistakeholder governance.”

To see through the strategy of deferred elimination takes time and requires experience. Unsurprisingly, many newcomers to “MTI imagination” as Ruben Nelson calls it, lack this experience. As Helena Norberg Hodge has observed, “the most traditional peoples are more vulnerable to the propaganda that rural communities are inferior to the shiny, clean, images of urban consumer culture and on the other hand, some of the strongest resistance to corporate rule comes from people who have experienced the spiritual poverty of the consumer culture.” Since indigenous voices are needed more than ever in our times, it is tragic when they are coopted into deferred elimination.

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.

In my contribution to the GTI Forum on Big history narratives in March 2023, I laid out a “big history” narrative that offers the warning that the human rights ideal of equal dignity for all (in contrast to unequal honor for all) introduces a new form of humiliation, namely, *dignity humiliation*, which is more hurtful than *honor humiliation* and thus can create fault lines of polarization and confrontation that are unprecedented and have the power to undermine, obliterate, and malign the most benign processes.³

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.⁴ “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. As Ruben Nelson wrote, “A new path is opening before us. One we have not seen before.” On this path, I do my best to avoid humiliation. Among others, I try to stay clear of those cycles of humiliation that are being carried by hot button words such as “socialism,” “communism,” and “capitalism.” I have coined the term *dignism (dignity-ism)* to describe a decent global village:

Dignism describes a world 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. It is a world where unity in diversity reigns, where we unite in respecting human dignity and celebrating diversity, where we prevent unity from devolving into oppressive uniformity, and keep diversity from sliding into hostile division. Dignism means ending past cycles of humiliation and preventing new ones from emerging. Dignism means loving care for the common good of all of humanity as co-inhabitants of one single finite habitat. Dignism weaves together all dignifying aspects of all the world’s cultural traditions into one decent global village.

References

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Endnotes

- ¹ Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990, p. 159.
- ² Raskin, 2014, p. 4.
- ³ See my most recent book, Lindner, 2023, which I can send to whoever might wish to receive it.
- ⁴ 'Freedom for the wolves', Berlin, 1969, p. xlv.