



August 2019

The Global Doesn't Exist

Contribution to GTI Forum [Think Globally, Act Locally?](#)

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 Woodward, “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.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Arturo Escobar, "The Global Doesn't Exist," contribution to GTI Forum "Think Globally, Act Locally?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-local-escobar>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.