



August 2021

Time for a Climate Insurgency

Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

Jeremy Brecher

Since the end of the feudal era, the world order has been largely structured by the nation-state system. Individuals have been willing to kill and die for their countries. The pursuit of individual and group interests has occurred largely within a national framework.

Nonetheless, social and political movements have often transgressed national boundaries and expressed solidarities that go beyond them. People frequently join together in social movements that embody the principle and practice of solidarity. And these movements often cut across national boundaries.

A few historical examples:

- The “Age of Democratic Revolutions” between 1760 and 1800 saw people in dozens of countries participate in uprisings and movements to establish popular control of the state. While these movements advocated national independence, there was extensive solidarity and mutual support among them.
- The international abolitionist movement spread throughout Europe and the Americas, abolished slavery in the world’s major countries, and eventually made enslavement a crime worldwide.
- The rise of labor and socialist movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries embodied a solidarity across national borders. The International Workingmen’s Association (First International) sent money, printed leaflets, and organized boycotts in support of workers engaged in fights in countries all over Europe.

- The disarmament movement of the 1950s and 1960s spread all over the world, penetrating the supposedly impenetrable “iron curtain,” establishing its independence from both Cold War “blocs,” and ultimately helping bring about a ban on nuclear testing and an 80% reduction in strategic weapons.
- In the 1960s, the movement against the Vietnam War spread around the world, challenged the countries that had allied with the US in its war against Vietnam, and eventually contributed to the crisis in US policy that led to the withdrawal of troops.
- The Women’s Liberation Movement, which grew out of discussions in the Civil Rights Movement, has come to contest gender inequality in every country and sphere of life around the world.
- The environmental movement spread rapidly in the late 1960s. The underlying ecological concept of the interdependence of all forms of life developed from absurdity to common sense, and environmental legislation became a global norm. The global character of the movement was exhibited by the annual Earth Day, in which tens of millions of people participated in countries around the world.
- The February 2003 protests against the US attack on Iraq drew in 15 million people for demonstrations around the world, described by the [New York Times](#) as a reminder that “there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.”
- The global justice movement coordinated action around the world and brought the attempt to form a “new world order” under the World Trade Organization to a halt in the 1999 Battle of Seattle.
- Occupy Wall Street, which began as a sleep-in of a few hundred people in a New York City park, quickly became a worldwide movement with occupations in scores of countries. Its 2011 Day of Action was joined by rallies in more than 1,000 cities in eighty-two countries.
- The climate movement has from the outset been global—like the global warming it contests. The student-initiated 2019 Global Climate Strike, for example, brought together 7.6 million participants in 6,000 events in 185 countries.

- When Black Lives Matter protests swept across America after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, hundreds of thousands of people in London, Sydney, Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, Tokyo, and many other communities took to the streets in solidarity.

Each of these examples illustrates the globalization of human solidarity. Why, despite the dominance of the nation-state framework, do movements arise in which solidarity transgresses nation-state boundaries?

In a world where “self-preservation” is often regarded as “the first law of life,” solidarity is a form of action in which mutual aid serves as the means for realizing individual interests. Solidarity is the practice of pursuing individual ends by realizing mutual and common ends.

The process by which solidarity emerges is what, echoing the seventeenth-century Digger Gerrard Winstanley, I call “common preservation.” Common preservation is the process by which people shift from strategies based on greed and self-aggrandizement to strategies that pursue self-interest by promoting common interests.

Solidarity and common preservation are likely to emerge where people discover that they are powerless to realize their ends by themselves, but that they may be able to do so by cooperation with others.

New common preservations and solidarities generally develop when people are presented a common threat or problem that can’t be solved by individuals and limited groups. They experience the necessity to build new solidarities that cross national and other borders. This doesn’t happen automatically, but through an active process of constructing links among people and groups who have been isolated, divided, and even antagonistic.

Such movements have repeatedly transcended national boundaries and established transnational cooperation, loyalty, and solidarity. But they have not yet transmuted the nations and the nation-state system that prevent global human cooperation to address global problems like climate change, nuclear holocaust, and injustice.

How can nation-states be not only penetrated by global forces, but also have their most destructive aspects metamorphosed by them?

Consider today's most urgent and devastating threat: climate change.

The nation-state system has helped cause and perpetuate climate destruction. National sovereignty gives states the authority to determine what can or cannot be emitted into the atmosphere in their territories; it is states that authorize the emission of climate-destroying greenhouse gas emissions. The sovereignty of nations ensures that common human interests are trumped by the authority of states—allowing governments to destroy the global atmospheric commons without restraint from higher authority or their people. The system of sovereign nation-states generates a competition in which each state must encourage the exploitation of nature's resources or face loss of power and wealth within the competitive world order. The direct and indirect dependence of states and their officials on dominant economic actors—notably, industries that produce and use fossil fuels—often makes governments subordinate to those with an interest in perpetuating climate destruction.

To overcome these limitations, the climate movement needs to become what I have called a global nonviolent constitutional insurgency.¹

Insurgencies are social movements, but movements of a special type: they reject current rulers' claims to legitimate authority. Insurgencies often develop from movements that initially make no such challenge to established authority, but eventually conclude that it is necessary to realize their objectives. To effectively protect the earth's climate and the future of our species, the climate protection movement may well have to become such an insurgency.

A nonviolent insurgency rejects and resists the authority of the state, but it eschews violence. Instead, it exercises power by mobilizing people for various forms of nonviolent mass action that withdraw acquiescence and cooperation from the powers that be.

A constitutional insurgency declares established laws and policies illegitimate and illegal and sets out to establish alternative law through nonviolent self-help. Destruction of the earth's climate represents a violation of the most fundamental constitutional principles; as federal judge Ann Aiken straightforwardly declared, "the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society." If established government won't protect that right, it is up to the people of the world to do so.

Global nonviolent constitutional insurgency is a vehicle for undermining the illegitimate authority of states. Under the public trust doctrine, all people have rights that states, whether their own or others, can't violate. All human beings have valid claims against all states that are destroying a stable climate.

Today, we can see the emergence of climate solidarity all around us. We can see the emergence of new solidarities—self-preservation transformed to common preservation. But our solidarity is still blocked by a world order based on the war of all against all. One way to overcome our thrust to mutual destruction could be to transform the global climate movement into a global climate insurgency.

Endnotes

1. The ideas presented in this contribution are developed more fully in *Common Preservation in a Time of Mutual Destruction* (Oakland: PM Press, 2021).

About the Author



Jeremy Brecher is a historian of social movements and a co-founder of the Labor Network for Sustainability. His recent books include the *Climate Insurgency Trilogy* and *Common Preservation in a Time of Mutual Destruction*.

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 Jeremy Brecher, "Time for a Climate Insurgency," contribution to GTI Forum "Can Human Solidarity Globalize?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-solidarity-brecher>.

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.