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Stepping Stones Toward Unity

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

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First comes the idea.

Richard Falk, in his essay "[Global Solidarity: Toward a Politics of Impossibility](#)," focuses on the idea of human solidarity as a key to global transformation. He decries ways in which ambitious reforms to the current global system are often framed as impossible, typically by elites benefiting from the fragmentary and dis-integrated global status quo. He exhorts us to rethink what could be possible, by imagining "a sense of our place in the cosmos so that it becomes our standpoint: a patriotism for humanity in which the whole becomes greater than the part, and the part is no longer the dominant organizing principle of life on the planet."

Like many others, I have found Falk's vision of global solidarity both highly instructive and inspiring. Here I want to explore reasons for tying that vision more closely to the transformation of regional and global political institutions.

First, I will note that Falk's emphasis on the idea of global solidarity resonates with transformation paths highlighted by some ambitious global institutional reformers of the past. Perhaps the most salient here is acclaimed science fiction author and world state advocate H. G. Wells (1866–1946), who indeed declared that "First comes the idea..." For Wells, it was a clearly articulated idea of global unity within a world state that would be crucial to inspiring support for it: "We have to create a vision of it, to make it seem first a possibility and then an approaching reality. This is a task that demands the work and thought of thousands of minds. We have to spread the idea of a Federal World State, as an approaching reality, throughout the world."¹

Falk has previously championed some significant global institutional reforms. For example, in his 1975 book *A Study of Future Worlds*, he outlined a reformed UN or like set of global institutions featuring a world parliamentary assembly with some binding legislative powers, a world executive, and a world court.² Later, amid the anti-corporate globalization protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s, he and Andrew Strauss argued for an initially advisory global parliamentary assembly, as a way to enable global civil society groups to have a much stronger voice in international politics.³

In the present essay, however, he is focused almost exclusively on the development of a broader global ethos, a shared idea and vision of global human solidarity. The call to embrace such an ethos resonates with his previous work on the ideal of the “citizen pilgrim.” Citizen pilgrims are agents in a system still dominated by sovereign states who nevertheless adopt an orientation to global solidarity and press states to act more humanely and justly. His most recent book, a memoir, is titled *Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim*.⁴ In the present essay, the call could be seen as aiming at an even broader global transformation of attitudes and orientations.

I believe we can honor and affirm such a vision while seeking to advance a more institutionally oriented conception of solidarity and citizenship beyond the state, especially at the regional level in the near term. The European Union, for example, offers an unmatched laboratory for exploring, in Falk’s terms, the limits of the “feasible, desirable, and necessary” in a set of institutions encompassing more than 500 million persons. Indeed, the idea of such a unified Europe animated thinkers long before Wells penned his first world state treatises.

The EU in practice gives an idea of how common institutions beyond the state could deal in common with such problems as the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted by Falk. For example, while the European Commission’s early vaccine procurement was criticized, actual vaccine purchase and distribution was coordinated in common, as were grants and loans to help member states recover.⁵ And, while a survey of EU residents found critical views of the EU’s pandemic response overall, respondents were much more critical of their own states’ responses and affirmed the view that EU membership was a positive.⁶

The EU again serves as a laboratory, not some categorical model for regional institutional development. It offers, however, an eminently concrete institutional context in which to promote the sorts of aims that Falk identifies with the development of solidarity across borders. Its common trans-state institutions offer important targets or mechanisms for trans-state collective action, and for seeking to advance in common the vital interests of persons from more than two dozen states.

Efforts to develop shared institutions have emerged in various other regions, backed by organizations including South America's Mercosur, the Economic Community of West African States, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Caribbean Community, and numerous others. Each has faced challenges related to resources, the will of powerful member states, etc., in achieving regional governance aims. Each represents, however, not an institutional imaginary but concrete efforts at promoting solidarity across states and promoting the interests of broader sets of persons in common. Each provides institutions around which—or against which—to orient some cross-border solidarity efforts, and each provides a distinctive laboratory for exploring challenges to and possibilities for regional citizenship and solidarity in various parts of the world.

Fully global institutions with solidaristic potential remain more in the realm of the idea, but institutional ideas about promoting human rights recognition, development, human security, etc., are well established after some seventy-five years of trial and error at the United Nations. For example, proposals for a global parliamentary assembly, whether created as part of the UN system or initially separate from it, have been offered by a range of authors, including again Falk and Strauss.⁷ Such proposals provide potential common ground around which to orient efforts to promote solidarity and common action, and to enable further collective action at the global level if some such body could be launched.

Adopting a somewhat more institutionally oriented approach to human solidarity—something less than Wells' comprehensive World State but more explicitly focused on the potential to transform existing and possibly emerging suprastate institutions—could be a useful complement to Falk's call to expand our view of the globally possible. It could provide discrete targets for collective action and give a clearer idea of how the idea of human solidarity might be advanced.

Endnotes

1. H.G. Wells, *The Salvaging of Civilization: The Probable Future of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 82.
2. Richard Falk, *A Study of Future Worlds* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 228–75.
3. See Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss, *A Global Parliament: Essays and Articles* (Berlin: Committee for a Democratic U.N., 2011). The book collects articles on the topic published from 1997–2010.
4. Richard Falk, *Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim* (Gardena, CA: Clarity Press, 2021).
5. See International Monetary Fund, “Policy Responses to Covid-19,” accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#E>.
6. Jon Henley, “Europeans’ Confidence in EU Hit by Coronavirus Response,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/09/europeans-confidence-in-eu-hit-by-coronavirus-response>.
7. See Falk and Strauss, *A Global Parliament*, 89–97.

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