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## Organizing across Place

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

David Featherstone

Richard Falk's [commentary](#) is a welcome contribution to opening up the horizons of political imaginaries in this difficult political conjuncture. Here I want to think about three key issues that will hopefully push elements of this agenda in useful and productive ways.

Firstly, while I think the ambition of Falk's account is important, I would question the framing he uses in relation to thinking about "human solidarity." To get at some of the interdependencies that he wishes to foreground here, especially in the context of the "Anthropocene," it is useful to position solidarities as always necessarily constructed through relations and connections which make it more akin to a "more than human" achievement. This also usefully positions solidarities as interventions in and struggles over the different ways in which social and environmental relations are configured. This is a crucial move if we are to rethink solidarity as a practice for urgent, contemporary struggles such as those for climate justice. As Mukul Kumar has emphasized in relation to recent struggles over the politics of coal in Tamil Nadu, tracing the different ways in which contestation is "assembled" can usefully draw attention to both the ways through which solidarities are constructed through intervening in all sorts of unequal social and environmental relations and the agency of different marginal groups.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, I would argue that it is necessary to consider more carefully some of the ways in which actually existing forms of solidarity and internationalism can prefigure the kind of global imaginaries of solidarity that Falk conjures here. In this respect, it is also important to perhaps think in more nuanced ways about the different geographies and spaces through which global solidarities might be constructed and built. While I appreciate why Falk wishes to counterpose "globalism and human community" with "the realities of localism and tribal community," it is

necessary to go beyond such stark oppositions. It is crucial to recognize that solidarities, even global ones, need to be built from somewhere.

I worry that a vision of solidarity which aspires to “globalism” is one which seeks to transcend rather than be worked through the messy realities of particular places and contexts. Following the work of the geographer Doreen Massey, I think it is through intervening in the ways in which places are connected with other places and the terms on which they become hubs of different relations across space that many actually existing “global” solidarities are envisioned and practiced.<sup>2</sup> A key recent example here is the ways in which dockers at various ports in Italy, South Africa, and the United States have responded to the call of Palestinian unions for global solidarity.

As Nikolas Kosmatopoulos has noted, “Italian dockworkers in the ports of Ravenna and Livorno refused to load ships belonging to ZIM, the Israeli transport giant. The trade union L’Unione Sindacale di Base (USB) said that the Livorno port will not be an accomplice in the massacre of Palestinians as the cargo contained weapons and explosives that could be used to kill the Palestinian population.”<sup>3</sup> There have been similar actions by South African dockworkers in Durban and at the Port of Oakland, both of which have long histories of international solidarity, particularly during the apartheid era.<sup>4</sup> What is significant here is the way in which such global solidarities are produced, not by an overarching global vision, but by situated actions which intervene in the global infrastructures and connections shaped through these ports. Such actions stress the importance of building such global solidarities “from below” rather than through an appeal to globalist institutions.

Finally, Falk’s reflections raise the question of the relation between solidarity and political antagonisms, i.e., what antagonisms might be generated through which progressive solidarities are shaped and how might they cohere. This is a particularly crucial question given the ways in which intensely reactionary forms of racialized right-wing populism/far-right politics are seeking to hegemonize some of the ways in which key grievances become articulated. This also raises questions about the ways in which different antagonisms might be generated in ways which can be the focus of different progressive alliances which might shape aspects of global solidarity.

Take the figure of Winston Churchill, raised here by Falk as someone whose investments in colonialism meant he was blind to the potential impacts of anti-colonialism, despite being a

“great” war-time leader. Churchill is an interesting example of a figure who speaks to some of the tensions of the current moment. Churchill remains reviled by working-class communities in places like South Wales for his alleged role in sending troops as part of the repression of striking miners before World War I, and his role as a key proponent and practitioner of colonialism is contested in many places.<sup>5</sup> There is also increasing recognition of the ways in which his racism was not incidental to, but absolutely constitutive, of his politics.

The memory of Churchill, however, has been central to the reassertion of imperial articulations of Britishness in the wake of Brexit by the Conservatives and others on the right.<sup>6</sup> The different ways in which Churchill is contested in relation to the consequences of his actions in different parts of the world, however, suggest ways in which solidarities might be articulated by those who oppose how his memory is invoked. Crucial here is the ways in which opposition to Churchill’s articulations of colonialism can be linked to his violent, classed actions within the UK, highlighting continuities rather than differences across increasingly potent divisions between those constructed as “white working-class” communities in post-industrial parts of the UK and multiethnic articulations of solidarity.

Linking more explicitly to questions of transition, there are also key ways in which the antagonisms shaped by movements for climate justice open up different lenses on the practices in which solidarities might be shaped. This also speaks to the necessity for global visions of solidarity to engage seriously with the unequal geographies of power that have long shaped uneven relations between the global North and South. What is significant about emergent forms of climate justice politics, such as the organizing work of the Wretched of the Earth collective, is the way some of their approaches to solidarity make these uneven relations a point of departure for how they envision forms of global solidarity.<sup>7</sup> Foregrounding these uneven relations and ways of engaging with them in productive ways is central to delivering the promise of global solidarity as so powerfully articulated by Falk’s intervention.

## Endnotes

1. Mukul Kumur, “Disassembling Coal: Finance Capital, Environmental Law, and the Right to Information in South India,” *Antipode* 53, no. 4 (2021): 124–142.

2. See, for example, Doreen Massey *World City* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

3. Nikolas Kosmatopoulos "Intervention – 'Block the Boat, Float the Flotilla': Palestine, Surplus, and Solidarity," *Antipode Online*, June 21, 2021, <https://antipodeonline.org/2021/06/21/block-the-boat/>.
4. Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).
5. There continues to be debates about the specific role of Churchill in relation to the repression of striking/rioting miners at Tonypany in 1911 and the shooting of two young men at Llanelli during the railway workers' strike in the same year. For detailed discussions, see Anthony O'Brien, "Churchill and the Tonypany Riots," *Welsh History Review* 17, no. 1 (1994) 67–99; Dai Smith, *In the Frame: Memory in Society Wales, 1910-1920* (Swansea: Parthian, 2010). In terms of his broader colonial role, his response to the Bengal famine of 1943 is particularly contested. As Madhusree Mukerjee notes, "Time and again Winston Churchill chose to privilege the comfort and economic security of British citizens over the survival of colonial subjects, making a series of decisions that worsened the Bengal famine"; see "Bengal Famine of 1943: An Appraisal of the Famine Inquiry Commission," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 11 (2014): 74.
6. Priyamvada Gopal, "Why Can't Britain Handle the Truth about Winston Churchill?," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/why-cant-britain-handle-the-truth-about-winston-churchill>.
7. See, for example, "An Open Letter to Extinction Rebellion," *Red Pepper*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/an-open-letter-to-extinction-rebellion/>.

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## About the Author



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