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## Capitalist Crisis, Radical Opportunity Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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Richard Falk's eloquent [essay](#) asks us to make the leap from "the politics of the possible" to "a politics of impossibility" by imagining and crafting a "moral epistemology to achieve responsible anthropocentrism" by engaging "globalism and human community." But how do we make that happen? Here I offer a complementary perspective that shows how capitalist crises (of profitability or legitimacy or both) have led to collective action (revolutions, social movements) which in turn has sometimes compelled states and ruling elites to enact people-oriented welfarist policies. Let's note, however, that since the 1980s, the ruling elites have refrained from enacting such policies; instead, they have welcomed growing income inequalities and enjoyed their own, expansive political power and economic privileges.

Triggered in part by capital's need to expand (as Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*), the first globalization wave of the late nineteenth century entailed colonialism and imperialism. But it also generated a wave of revolutionary activism, as well as the expansion of workers' movements, trade unions, and socialist parties. In response, and to sideline socialist internationalism, German Chancellor Bismarck laid the legislative foundations for the first welfare state. The Great Depression was a major crisis for the capitalist order; in the US, the Franklin Roosevelt administration adopted redistributive measures and state regulation of markets—although this, too, was a way of mitigating the growing appeal of socialism and of communist parties.

The post-WWII era should have been one of global solidarity and common humanity, given the enormous sacrifices of the Soviet Union in the war against fascism, but Cold War ideology and corporate interests put the world on a different track. Still, statesmen and activists in the

“Third World” and the socialist bloc sought to engender a new form of global solidarity through intellectual and commercial exchanges, as well as the promotion of a New International Economic Order. (Some scholars have termed this “the second wave of globalization,” albeit a non-capitalist one.)

The NIEO was resisted by the US and allies from the start, but its end came with the structural crisis of the 1970s, which was “resolved” by the turn away from Keynesianism and toward a neoliberal form of capitalist globalization, promoted by the US, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. In the interregnum came such morbid symptoms as Islamist movements, America’s New Religious Right, and the US assaults on Iraq.

The deficits of the neoliberal capitalist model were laid bare by the 2007-08 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession; in response, a new wave of global protests ensued—against the “1%,” against austerity measures, against the privatization and degradation of public services. The Arab Spring was one such popular response.

This time, there were no concessions on the economic justice or anti-militarist fronts, and thus the capitalist system’s resilience continued. Indeed, the financialization that began with imperialism and took off with neoliberalism has now been accompanied by a rampant form of information technology and digitization that threaten jobs and personal privacy while also enabling drone warfare and cyberattacks. Not coincidentally, the new technologies have made billionaires of the tech companies’ major shareholders—many of whom circumvent taxation. Perversely, the billionaires have become richer during the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. Yes, the system is rigged, and it always has been.

In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi wrote that “unless the alternative to the social setup is a plunge into utter destruction, no crudely selfish class can maintain itself in the lead.” Today’s ruling elites are indeed that “crudely selfish class,” but they seem incapable of recognizing the need for change. Nor does there appear to be an alternative global project in the making. In the past, many of the global movements that arose following capitalist crises were characterized by both a common set of values and goals and a propensity to strategize. Today’s movements are more fluid, less coordinated, and focused on specific issues rather than a wide-ranging critique of capitalist

globalization and acknowledgement of the interconnected nature of militarism and war, corporate privilege, climate change, labor exploitation, racial injustice, and hyper-masculinities.

Meanwhile, the US seems intent on maintaining its hegemony—witness the persistence of US military spending (4% of GDP; 58% of discretionary spending) and its numerous military bases across the globe. Instead of the 0.7% of GDP allocated to international development, the US resorts to its usual bullying tactics of imposing punishing economic sanctions on developing countries while coddling Israel with military grants, and of enforcing harsh immigration policies. Can our disparate movements coalesce around a broad program for peace, justice, and international cooperation?

In 2014, Massachusetts Peace Action, of which I am a board member, produced a document called "[A Foreign Policy for All](#)," criticizing the military-industrial complex and calling for nuclear disarmament, peaceful coexistence, a strengthened UN, peacebuilding at home and abroad, and other goals; it also offered a political strategy for change that included priority areas for movement-building. Similarly, groups like the Justice Democrats and Sunrise combine devastating critiques of the status quo with a political plan to move the Democratic Party to the left. Can we dare imagine a future when income and wealth flow not to hedge fund managers and big shareholders but to essential workers and their families? When the well-being of people and the planet take precedence over profits and arms sales?

We have no shortage of meaningful and progressive ideas and proposals for the Great Transition—proposals that are grounded in a recognition of what is feasible, what is necessary, and what is desirable (as Richard Falk advises), but we need more coordinated action. The ruling elites are implacably opposed to our proposals, and our movements have yet to demonstrate political will and commitment to create (recreate?) those bonds of international solidarity and programs for the desired transition from our current era of chaos, injustice, militarism, and inequality to a sustainable and socially just world order. It remains to be seen if the global pandemic triggers the sort of structural crisis that compels states to make people-oriented investments. If that opportunity arises, our movements must be prepared to coalesce and act for systemic change.

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## About the Author



Valentine M. Moghadam is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University. Her current areas of research include globalization; transnational social movements and networks; economic citizenship; and gender, development, and women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Her books include *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, the award-winning *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*, and *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*. She holds a PhD in sociology from American University.

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